

Towards an Additional Seaport to Serve the Gaza Strip

Policy Insights by a Diplomeds Policy Support Group

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In early 2022, Diplomeds - The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy launched an initiative to propose an additional seaport to serve the Gaza Strip, with the aim of improving the **situation in Gaza** and providing a contribution to **Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking**.

A multi-national Mediterranean policy support group has been assembled, consisting of Egyptian, Palestinian, Israeli, Jordanian and Cypriot retired ambassadors, scholars and policy analysts, and supported by experts from Morocco, Turkey and Spain.

Throughout the year, the policy support group acted collaboratively to learn from **past efforts**, assess **alternatives**, conduct informational interviews with officials, map countries' positions, interests and conditions for progress, identify **scenarios and feasible options**, define zones of possible agreement, and steps that can be pursued.

Below are the key **policy insights** generated by this process.

Attempts to advance a seaport for Gaza have been taking place **unsuccessfully** for over 20 years. Palestinians presented proposals, then **ideas and alternatives** were raised, mostly by Israelis and Americans, but did not materialize. There was no **Mediterranean discussion** on the issue throughout the years.

A seaport in the Gaza Strip is currently **not possible**, given the status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the intra-Palestinian divide. Various options that will lessen **Palestinian reliance** on the Ashdod port do exist. The option of a port in **Cyprus** serving Gaza is generally rejected by Cyprus. The option of using **al-Arish** port in Egypt and perhaps other Egyptian ports to serve Gaza, could be a feasible alternative, if the requirements of the different actors are met:

Egypt will not agree to Palestinian or foreign **presence or autonomy** in its ports; Israel will not agree to change the current **security inspection** modalities in Kerem Shalom regarding goods entering Gaza. It will insist on continuing to screen incoming or outgoing goods. Egypt also will not accept shouldering such **responsibility**. Israel is unlikely to lift **restrictions** on imports and exports from Gaza, and under an escalation scenario, additional restrictions might be imposed. The Palestinian Authority will oppose any port alternative that could be seen as **empowering Hamas**.

Some humanitarian and **construction goods** already enter Gaza from ports in Egypt, in coordination with Qatar and with Israel's approval. The al-Arish port in Sinai is currently undergoing **major expansion**, and can be well-suited to serve the Gaza Strip. Construction is expected to conclude in **2-3 years**. There were sporadic American and Egyptian **indications** that using al-Arish port to also serve Gaza could be regarded favorably.

Egypt is not likely to initiate such a move – unless it is part of a **broader package** of political and economic measures to help advance Israeli-Palestinian peace – but may respond favorably if **asked by the US and Israel**. A substantial **Gulf or Western** investment in al-Arish port's modernization could positively reinforce such an American or Israeli request.

Adopting the al-Arish option is not likely to be a political **game-changer**, but can generate some **positive movement** on an otherwise stagnant issue. It will have **symbolic importance** for Palestinians (lessening dependence on Israel) and may entail some **economic benefits** (possible lower costs of goods transfer).

The al-Arish port could also be used to deliver necessary equipment to the **Gaza Marine** natural gas field, should an arrangement for its development be reached.

An additional port serving Gaza may also be a **catalyst** for other developments that can increase international involvement and improve the situation in Gaza.

Assessing the **economic implications** of the al-Arish option for the different stakeholders and developing a concrete **policy proposal** for this alternative would be the next steps in 2023.