

Connecting the West Bank and Gaza Strip: Questions of “Safe-Passage”

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The idea of a “safe-passage” for Palestinians looking to travel between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was part of the 1995 Oslo II Interim Agreement. The concept behind the provision rests on the premise asserted in the 1993 Declaration of Principles that “[the Government of Israel (GOI) and the Palestinian Authority (PA)] view the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit¹.” Given this, the time elapsed since Oslo II has produced very little progress on the “safe-passage” issue, as more immediate concerns such as Palestinian terrorism, Israeli retribution, and Israeli settlement policies have dominated the agenda. Necessitated in part by the recent unilateral actions of the GOI, and the greater danger that the window of opportunity is closing, the time has come for the issue of “safe-passage” to be re-examined with a serious effort to reach agreement. As such, this analysis will examine several different aspects of the “safe passage” issue relative to connecting the West Bank and Gaza while addressing the current political situation and necessities.

An important primary fact to understand about the controversial nature of safe-passage is that, per Oslo II, Israeli Defense Forces are the sole security force allowed to police and enforce any specific safe-passage agreement. In fact, specific safe passage agreements have actually been worked out between the two parties, both in ideal specific-passage and in practical specific-passage. In terms of ideal specific-passage, Oslo II yielded a detailed map of agreeable safe-passage routes between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In terms of applying this practically, safe-passage routes are in existence currently, but hardly in the form presumably envisioned by the framers of Oslo II. Because the majority of the safe-passage routes in existence today use public Israeli roads, it is not uncommon for the corridors to be shut down on the Palestinian ends for “security concerns.” The issue is therefore contentious for both parties: the Palestinian people desire safe, consistent, and readily-accessible passage between the West Bank and Gaza, while Israel maintains legitimate security concerns, especially on issues such as terrorism, drug-running, smuggling of contraband, etc². The problem is obviously complex, but a dissection of the issue yields the point that Israeli forces are far more concerned about these activities impacting Israel, and would be far less concerned (although not *unconcerned*) about such activities flowing *between* Palestinian areas only. As such, it is inferable that were there to be a direct and secure link between Gaza and the West Bank, much of the concern of the IDF officials would be

lessened, while simultaneously perhaps creating a safe-passage system closer to the intent of the Oslo II framers.

To the credit of past officials who have worked to fulfill the goals of Oslo II, the concept of linkage has never fully been abandoned, but instead has been effectively tabled, for several reasons. The first reason, as previously mentioned, was the political and strategic view that the issue was secondary, taking a back seat to issues such as terrorism, settlements, etc. The second reason is more logistical; the amount of money required for the actual physical connection of the West Bank and Gaza was a compelling enough reason in itself to put any plans on hold. Specifically, plans revived by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in mid-1999 to build an elevated bridge connecting the Palestinian areas offered the most developed and feasible solution to fulfilling the “safe-passage” clause of Oslo. Barak noted that the bridge would extend “from Beit Hanoun [in Gaza] to Dura near Hebron... with four lanes, a railway line, a water pipe, a communications cable³.” According to Barak, however, the cost of nearly \$200 million was an obstacle that could not be overcome at the time. Additionally, the stubbornness of the Palestinian negotiating position at that time requiring two “safe-passages” hindered the implementation of the project. Statements from the PA demonstrated an unwillingness to redefine the safe-passage lines to incorporate a different passage. Ultimately, then, it can be said that although there was an opportunity of political desire and planning to create this bridge, the opportunity was lost because of both economic constraints and blockage by the PA.

The inability to move forward with the idea of bridge, tunnel, or other physical separation-structure was an unfortunate setback for progression towards peace. According to the Sharm El-Sheik Memorandum of September 1999, “safe-passage” is a necessary condition for any negotiations to move towards a permanent solution.⁴

Had the Israeli government begun construction on the proposed bridge solution, an important prerequisite condition would have been met, and steps could have been taken towards the permanent solution as advocated in the Sharm El-Sheik. Despite the objection of the PA in terms of requiring two passages, the creation of one passage could very well have been a compelling enough factor to help bring about a broader settlement, most often referred to as the Permanent Status Accords.

Comparing the 1999 political atmosphere to the current situation, similarities are present, although the recent Yassin execution may have changed this. As mentioned, the idea of a physical, dedicated “safe-passageway” was never truly ruled out; that is evident in recent instructions by the Israeli government to begin developing a new railroad line that would effectively connect the town of Ariel with towns in the Gaza Strip. Additionally, the Taba Negotiations in September 2000 yielded a non-paper on the negotiations, specifically mentioning that “both sides agreed that there is going to be a safe passage from the north of Gaza (Beit Hanun) to the Hebron district, and that the West Bank and Gaza strip must be territorially linked⁵.” This greatly increases the promise of an actual agreement on safe-passage, although certain issues, especially regarding administration and security, remain. In contrast with the 1999 situation, however, is the smaller window of opportunity for peace. With the construction of the security fence by the GOI, the GOI has demonstrated its resolve to move forward without the Palestinians. With nearly all of the West Bank facing Gaza being sealed off by security fencing, both existing and proposed, effectively this barrier would cause Palestinian territories to become even further disconnected, thereby only exacerbating the situation of safe-passage. Seeing the Palestinian Authority cut its losses and accept a new proposal would not be an unfounded prediction.

However, the Israeli execution of spiritual leader Yassin marks a serious complication and rationale change for the construction of a West Bank-Gaza Bridge. While the long-term purpose of the bridge may prove to be a bridge to promote peace, the current political situation dictates a bridge to encourage separation. Despite this, a project to establish infrastructure sufficient for resolution of safe-passage issues would be both advantageous to the Palestinians, and could be done in a fashion that would not compromise Israeli security. Hence, given the reality of the situation, a macro-project that would facilitate a more amicable divorce would likely be welcome by the Palestinians and Israelis if the conditions were reasonable.

Most likely, the project would have to begin at either the Erez Junction or Jabalya in Gaza, ending approximately fifty kilometers later either at Ramallah (northern West Bank) or Tarkumiya (southern West Bank). A macro-project terminating in Tarkumiya would, at first glance, appear to be more realistic because the distance to major Israeli cities is more in relation to the Tarkumiya passage rather than the Ramallah passage. This proposal is similar to one made by Israeli PM Barak in 1999, in which a “four-lane elevated road would stretch 25 miles (47km) between Beit Hanoun in Gaza on the Mediterranean and the village of Dura in the West Bank⁶.”

Subsequent infrastructure and highway projects connecting Ramallah with a macro-project in southern West Bank would have the same effect as two separate safe-passage routes, while minimizing Israeli security threats by consolidating two passages into a single route.

To this end, further analysis will attempt to resolve the question of foreign investment for this kind of infrastructure (See my paper: [Economic Transformation and Development in Palestine](#)); the main point remains however, that “safe-passage” issues continue to become more critical as the situation deteriorates, and that the resolution of the issue by a carefully constructed macro-project would serve the interests of all parties involved.

Notes and References:

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