

US port plans in Gaza have 'hidden objectives'

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Reporter

OPINION

Since the outbreak of the war on Gaza on October 7, 2023, US President Joe Biden and his administration have continued to demonstrate unwavering support for Israel, leading some critics to view Washington as a key player in the conflict.

However, a recent statement by Biden on Friday introduced a surprising development as he announced plans to direct the US military on an "emergency mission to establish a port in the Gaza Strip" to get humanitarian aid to the Palestinian enclave.

But observers see another aspect to the floating port, linked to encouraging voluntary Palestinian migration to Europe and eliminating the role of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, essentially placing Israel in control of all Gaza crossings and ending any Palestinian sovereignty over them.

'Hidden objectives'

Hisham Khreisat, a Jordanian military and strategic affairs expert, told Anadolu that "the floating port off the shores of Gaza is a humanitarian facade hiding voluntary migration to Europe". "This military tactical port will receive Israeli approval because Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been seeking this idea since the beginning of the war, aiming for the voluntary displacement of Gazans and their flee to Europe," he added. He considered the idea of establishing the port "not new," pointing out

that it is "an old subject raised 10 years ago". "But Avigdor Lieberman (leader of the far-right 'Israel Our Home' party) failed the idea when he was the defense minister at the time, and Minister of Transportation Israel Katz then," he added. The expert continued, "Katz re-proposed the idea again, reaching an agreement with Cyprus and Greece." He explained that "a port in Cyprus, paid for by the US, will be allocated so that it reaches the site of the American port in Gaza's Khan Younis beach".

Khreisat emphasized that "the crucial thing is that all ships sending humanitarian aid will not go directly to the American port in Gaza but will go to the Ashdod port to be checked, then sent under Israeli navy control and drones to the Palestinian territory." "The US military will remain at sea and will supervise the port because Gaza is considered a hostile environment," he said. "The ships from the Cyprus port to Ashdod will be under the control of the Israeli Navy and satellites," Khreisat elaborated.

Immediate, future concerns

The Jordanian expert said he believes that "Biden is very concerned about the consequences of the Israeli army's invasion of Rafah and the failure to end the humanitarian disaster in Gaza, which will reflect on the election results in the US." "Therefore, he (Biden) will rush to build the port," he continued, noting that "there will be no deployment of US forces in Gaza, but there will be international agencies tasked with overseeing the delivery of aid." He added, "The aid will be shipped from Larnaca Airport in (Southern) Cyprus, which is the main relief center." Khreisat confirmed that "Israel will agree to the port for two reasons: facilitating the prisoner exchange deal and the ground attack on Rafah without provoking Washington." He concluded that "the Rafah crossing will undoubtedly be out of service because Israel does not trust it and considers it the main entry point for Hamas weapons."

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu claims that a Rafah City assault is key to victory and that Palestinian resistance groups acquire arms through smuggling through Egypt. Rafah crossing is crucial for humanitarian aid access, as Israel's restrictions threaten famine in northern regions of the enclave. Israel's planned aggression on Rafah, a last refuge for the 1.4 million displaced people, has raised regional and international concerns. Israel has waged a retaliatory offensive on Gaza since a cross-border

attack by Hamas on October 7. The offensive has killed nearly 31,000 Palestinians and injured over 72,500 others amid mass destruction and shortages of necessities. Tel Aviv has also imposed a crippling blockade on the Palestinian enclave, leaving its population, particularly residents of northern Gaza, on the verge of starvation. About 85% of Gazans have been displaced by the Israeli onslaught amid acute shortages of food, clean water, and medicine, while 60% of the enclave's infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, according to the UN. Israel is accused of genocide at the International Court of Justice, which in an interim ruling in January ordered Tel Aviv to stop genocidal acts and take measures to guarantee that humanitarian assistance is provided to civilians in Gaza.

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Palestinians carry bags of flour they grabbed from an aid truck near an Israeli checkpoint, as Gaza residents face crisis levels of hunger, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, in Gaza City, on February 19, 2024.

REUTERS

US port plan to step up aid delivery to Gaza criticised as 'distraction'

PERSPECTIVE ALJAZEERA — A United States plan to build a temporary port off Gaza's coast to step up the delivery of humanitarian aid has been criticised as an attempt to divert attention from hundreds of thousands of starving Palestinians and Israel's consistent blocking of assistance to the enclave. US President Joe Biden said in his State of the Union speech on Thursday that he was directing the US military to lead an emergency mission to set up a pier off Gaza's Mediterranean coast to receive ships carrying food, water, medicine, and temporary shelters.

Planning for the operation, which is initially to be based in Cyprus, does not envision the deployment of US military personnel in Gaza. "No US boots will be on the ground," Biden said.

While there has been growing criticism from the Biden administration of Israel severely restricting the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza by land — prompting the US to airdrop 36,000 meals in northern Gaza — it continues to supply the Israeli military with weapons and remains a staunch ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Biden gave few logistical details, but US officials said the operation would "take a number of weeks to plan and execute" and the required US forces are in the region or would soon begin moving there.

Washington would also coordinate with the Israeli army regarding the security situation on Gaza's coast, they said.

The head of the European Commission said on Friday that a maritime aid corridor could start operating between Cyprus and Gaza this weekend. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said a test run of food aid collected by a charity group and supported by the United Arab Emirates could be leaving Cyprus as early as Friday. "We are launching this Cyprus maritime corridor together, the European Union, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States," she said after visiting facilities in Larnaca, Cyprus. "We are now very close to opening this corridor, hopefully this Saturday, Sunday, and I'm very glad to see an initial pilot will be launched today." She gave no details on where the aid would be delivered in Gaza and made no reference to Biden's announcement about the "temporary pier" on the Gaza coast.

Gaza port plan a 'distraction'

Mustafa Barghouti, the secretary general of the Palestinian National Initiative, told Al Jazeera on Friday that the plan to build a port in Gaza "is not a new idea".

"It seems to be just another effort to divert attention from the real issue here, which is that 700,000 people are starving in north Gaza now, and Israel is not allowing humanitarian aid to them or the rest of the Gaza Strip," he said.

There are large quantities of aid waiting to get into the enclave at Gaza's border with Egypt, Barghouti said, adding that "the international community are doing nothing to pressure Israel to stop this blockade."

Al Jazeera's senior political analyst, Marwan Bishara, said Biden's announcement is a distraction from Washington's continued support for Israel.

"I think a statement like that in the State of the Union address is more theatrical and more public relations... than it is a sincere attempt at bringing an end to the suffering in Gaza," Bishara said.

Marc Owen Jones, an associate professor of Middle East studies and digital humanities at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar, told Al Jazeera

that Biden's focus on foreign policy — specifically the war in Gaza — in his speech was also him "trying to reaffirm fundamentally his support for Israel, first, and trying to assuage some of the criticism he's getting from members of his own party about the US response to Gaza".

He added that the way Biden framed the war by "adopting the Israeli line that everything they are doing, the genocide, the mass killings, is a response to October 7" sent a clear message that the US still stands firmly with Israel despite its expressed frustration with the lack of aid getting into Gaza.

Sigrid Kaag, the United Nations humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator in Gaza, welcomed the US plans to provide sea access for aid delivery into Gaza.

"At the same time, I cannot but repeat — air and sea is not a substitute for land — and nobody says otherwise," Kaag told reporters on Thursday after briefing the UN Security Council.

A spokesperson for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees said this week that "the most straightforward way of getting aid into the Gaza Strip is to use the existing crossings, namely Karem Abu Salem [called Kerem Shalom by Israel] and Rafah from Egypt."

Tamara Alrifai told Al Jazeera that the existing land crossings are "faster, safer, and more economical" than a maritime route and airdropping attempts. "Why should we reinvent the wheel? Let us use what exists and what has worked before," Alrifai said, stressing that there are "constant requests for a cease-fire that would allow an influx of humanitarian assistance".

Melanie Ward, the CEO of Medical Aid for Palestinians, told Al Jazeera: "Airdrops, temporary seaports, and the like are not realistic or lasting solutions to stave off looming famine and sustain life in Gaza."

"Five months on, it is long past time for the US, the UK, and others to use their substantial weight to ensure that their ally Israel immediately reopens land crossings into Gaza," she said on Friday.

"Only an immediate and lasting cease-fire will allow us to deliver the massive humanitarian response that is required after five months of Israel's indiscriminate bombardment and siege of the people of Gaza," Ward said. Since 1967, Israel has exercised full control of Gaza's coastline and territorial waters, blocking ships from reaching the strip.

Since 2007, Israel has shut almost all of Gaza's border crossings, and its port has been under Israeli naval blockade, making it the only seaport in the Mediterranean closed to shipping.

Since Israel launched its war on the enclave, it has allowed only a trickle of aid through the Karem Abu Salem crossing and the Rafah crossing with Egypt.

Israeli forces have also targeted Palestinians waiting for food aid. On February 29, at least 112 Palestinians were killed and more than 750 wounded when Israeli troops fired on hundreds of people waiting for food aid southwest of Gaza City.