



Port of No Return: The US Plan for Aid Relief in Gaza

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The US has embarked on a significant humanitarian initiative in Gaza, planning to establish a temporary maritime pier to facilitate large-scale aid delivery. This strategic move, announced by President Biden, aims to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza by ensuring the steady flow of food, water, medicine, and shelter to the region. While the initiative demonstrates the US commitment to humanitarian assistance, it also carries great risks. During other attempts to bring aid to conflict-torn areas, like civil war-torn Lebanon and Somalia, US aid distribution and peacekeeping efforts became full combat operations. Both of those combat operations faced critical failures that resulted in US casualties and humiliating US withdrawals. If successful, the Gaza port could be the first step of a Washington-led regional “Marshal Plan” - but failure would strengthen regional adversaries.



The Trident pier rests on the shore of Fort Story after an attempt to 'stab the beach' during the preliminary stages of the Joint Logistics-Over-the-Shore exercise, Aug.17, 2012. (Source: US Army, Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, Photo by Sgt. Edwin Rodriguez)

The US has chosen to cross the Rubicon. In his 2024 State of the Union address, President Biden reminded Americans, "The United States has been leading international efforts to get more humanitarian assistance into Gaza." He said, "I'm directing the US military to lead an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier in the Mediterranean on the Gaza coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine, and temporary shelters."

Washington has taken ownership of the crisis by committing significant US resources to mitigate the Gaza humanitarian emergency. It is now America's problem to solve. The Marshall Plan saved Western Europe from starvation and Soviet domination, but it came at a serious price: the US became intimately and inextricably involved in European affairs, effectively becoming "the most important country in Europe." The US Gaza port plan is the first step in a "Marshall Plan for Gaza." It is the Port of No Return.

However, when we look at American aid missions that were attempted in other areas embroiled in war and conflict in the years since the original Marshall Plan, the US has had less success. In the early 1980s, President Reagan deployed US Marines to Lebanon as part of a multinational peacekeeping force to stabilize the country amid its civil war and facilitate the withdrawal of Israeli forces. While their goal was to provide a neutral intervention to restore peace and order, the US forces increasingly found themselves embroiled in the conflict, as they were perceived as siding with the Lebanese government and its Christian allies against Muslim factions. The situation deteriorated dramatically on October 23, 1983, when a Hezbollah truck bomb destroyed the US Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 American service personnel. The devastating attack, one of the deadliest against US forces since World War II, led President Reagan to withdraw the remaining US forces, marking an end to the ill-fated intervention.

Similarly, in the early 1990s, the US initiated a humanitarian aid operation in Mogadishu, Somalia, to alleviate the severe famine and restore order amidst the country's civil war. What was meant to be a UN-backed aid distribution operation escalated into a military engagement when local warlords appropriated all the aid and monopolized its distribution. The US resolved to end the control of the warlords through military force, culminating in the infamous 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, vividly depicted in the book and film *Black Hawk Down*. Intense urban warfare resulted in significant casualties, with 18 US soldiers killed and 73 wounded. On the Somali side, hundreds, perhaps as many as 1,000 Somalis were killed. The dramatic failure of the operation prompted another embarrassing US withdrawal.

There is significant risk in endeavors of this kind. Hamas uses its monopoly on the distribution of resources, including foreign aid, to reward its members and supporters. It withholds these resources as a means of control. Power is a finite resource, and an increase in power for one party directly corresponds to a decrease in power for others. Should an alternative source of aid distribution emerge, this lever of Hamas's power will greatly diminish. There is therefore a strong likelihood that Hamas or a related group will employ violence against aid distribution personnel (civilian or military) to provoke an American withdrawal.

It is also important to bear in mind that some in Gaza have adopted a strong Islamist worldview. These individuals will see the US effort not as a form of international aid relief but as the US attempting to gain a foothold in Dar al-Islam (the territory of Islam). During the Gulf War (1991-92), al-Qaeda made an argument about the sanctity of Dar al-Islam by criticizing the presence of US military forces in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden argued that it was a violation of Islamic principles for non-Muslim forces to be stationed in the land of the believers. He called for the expulsion of US forces and for Muslims to unite against what he perceived as a Western intrusion into Islamic territory. Some Palestinians are already calling the US port just another form of occupation. For Gazans who embrace Islamist ideology, expelling a US presence would be part of their jihad, and the use of force against Americans would be sanctioned.

In the current conflict, Iranian proxies are already targeting Americans. The Houthis of Yemen are attacking US warships and neutral shipping nearly daily. US forces in Iraq and Syria have faced over 130 attacks since October. In all probability, Iran's surrogates in Gaza will also attack US forces when they arrive in the hope of driving them out. As one analyst put it, "The port will be a bullet magnet." If casualties mount and the US abandons the project, it will strengthen Iran and deepen Tehran's impression that the US is wavering in its regional support.

Contrary to media representation, Israel has been providing aid. A recent Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD) report noted that "Since Hamas's October 7 massacre, Israel has supported the transfer of 11,943 humanitarian aid trucks into Gaza. As of February 4, these deliveries included 144,030 tons of food, 20,780 tons of water, 23,160 tons of shelter equipment, 16,700 tons of medical supplies, 146 tanks of fuel, and 222 tanks of cooking gas." This aid is being delivered while major combat operations are still ongoing, putting IDF soldiers, aid workers, and Gazan residents at risk. In a recent aid delivery attempt, Gazans rushed toward an aid truck, causing a stampede with significant loss of life.

Even with the significant risk involved, the effort may be worthwhile. The US has a storied history of successful humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) programs. The most celebrated would be the aforementioned Marshall Plan (1948-

52). The Berlin Airlift (1948-49) was also a major US success. The US has achieved positive results in more recent HADR programs as well, including its responses to a massive tsunami in the Indian Ocean (2004), an earthquake in Haiti (2010), the massive Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013), Cyclone Idai in Mozambique (2019), and a 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Turkey and Syria (2023).


In Gaza, the relief plan calls for a combination of forward basing out of Cyprus and non-combatant “seabasing” nearer to Gaza with a temporary pier and infrastructure. Gaza has a port, but it is a small fishing boat marina that is not suitable for this sort of operation.

The US military is planning a Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore (JLOTS) operation. JLOTS is designed to facilitate the transport and distribution of personnel, equipment, and supplies from sea to shore in environments where traditional port facilities are limited or nonexistent. It involves a coordinated effort among multiple branches of the armed forces, utilizing various specialized equipment and techniques such as roll-on/roll-off ships, causeways, barges, and amphibious vehicles to offload cargo directly onto the shore. It is used when conventional ports are unavailable due to damage, conflict, or lack of infrastructure in remote or austere environments.


Pentagon spokesman Gen Ryder said, "[JLOTS] is a capability... that we are going to execute and enable us to get... up to 2,000,000 meals in [to Gaza] a day." Also, the EU has donated barges laden with foodstuffs that will be consolidated in Cyprus. According to a recent article in the *Jerusalem Post*, the operation would involve the screening of cargo in Cyprus, with Israeli officials' involvement.

Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore (JLOTS)


- **What is JLOTS:**
U.S. Army and U.S. Navy forces organized and equipped to conduct joint ship-to-shore operations where fixed port facilities are inadequate or unavailable.
- **What JLOTS can do:**
Offload equipment and cargo in-stream (offshore) and deliver cargo to a restricted port, an expeditionary floating pier, or a bare beach employing shallow draft transport watercraft.



Floating Pier



Pier Emplacement



Floating Causeway Pier

Examples of JLOTS capabilities. Source: DoD screenshot republished in "DOD to Construct Pier to Deliver Humanitarian Aid to Gaza" by Mathew Olay, DoD News.

US Military Sealift Command (MSC) conducted a demonstration of its JLOTS capabilities in 2017 through an exercise involving an Expeditionary Transfer Dock (ESD) ship. The USNS MONTFORD POINT (T-ESD-1) is a large vessel with a wide-open deck area and low freeboard, facilitating cargo transfer from conventional ships. The exercise demonstrated the feasibility of the "floating pier" concept. It showcased the ability to transfer large cargo at sea by using the MONTFORD POINT as a floating pier that would receive freight from traditional logistics vessels for further transfer by lighters or similar small vessels.

One day after President Biden's speech, US Central Command announced that it is deploying five ships and 1,000 troops to build the offshore port and has already dispatched the US Army Vessel (USAV) GENERAL FRANK S. BESSON (LSV-1). The BESSON departed from Virginia and will arrive no earlier than the end of

March. The BESSON is tasked with delivering the equipment necessary to establish the temporary pier. The USNS BENAVIDEZ (T-AKR-306), a BOB HOPE class ship, has been activated from the ready reserve to participate. The BENAVIDEZ is a large vessel that carries modules to build both floating and shore-based piers. The 7th Transportation Brigade from Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia, will oversee the JLOTS operation. Their mission is to "conduct multi-modal transportation operations in support of the Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration (RSOI) of joint and/or combined forces into a theater of operations."

President Biden assured Americans in his speech that there would be no US military personnel with "boots on the ground." It is unclear how the pier can be built securely and aid safely provided without a military presence. In addition, the pier facilities themselves need regular tending and maintenance. "No boots on the ground" likely means highly paid US and foreign contractors to do the job so US military and government personnel can avoid having to do so.

At a recent Pentagon press briefing, General Ryder was asked, "Does the DoD anticipate that Hamas will fire on them, on the JLOTS operation?" He replied, "That's certainly a risk, but if Hamas truly does care about the Palestinian people, one would hope that this international mission to deliver aid to people who need it would be able to happen unhindered." If the US is depending on Hamas's goodwill for the success of this operation, it is likely to be disappointed.

By spearheading the Gaza Port operation, the US has not only underscored its commitment to addressing the dire humanitarian needs in Gaza but is also taking on significant inherent risks. The initiative mirrors historic US humanitarian missions, highlighting America's capacity to mobilize substantial resources in response to global crises. While the plan aims to deliver essential aid and foster stability, it also exposes the US to risks associated with local power dynamics and anti-American sentiment, echoing past challenges in Lebanon and Somalia. Those were places where the US found itself entangled in local conflicts, with varying degrees of success and failure, all with a fair share of unintended consequences. For Washington this is a serious gamble with high stakes of either peace and stability or calamity and conflict.

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