Promoting Cooperation and Regional Prosperity through the Opening of a Southern Dead Sea Border Crossing

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Rationale

Border crossings between Israel and Jordan are presently limited to the Jordan River Crossing and the Araba/Arava Crossing, 200 kilometers in either direction from the Dead Sea communities of the Tamar Regional Council and South Ghor Municipality. In order to create the livelihood opportunities and promote sustainable development in the southern Dead Sea area, a new border crossing is required in the spirit of the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty.

Introduction

The Dead Sea, the lowest place on earth, is a unique resource located in the heart of a scenic natural treasure and of world-renowned value shared by Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority.

The Dead Sea is the world’s most saline body of water, known worldwide for both the therapeutic properties of its minerals and the buoyancy of its waters, both of which contribute to both medical and recreational tourism. The Dead Sea’s rich composition of minerals has spawned a chemical industry based on potassium, bromine, and magnesium production, as well as other raw materials, and the development of a cosmetics industry. The Dead Sea therefore serves as an economic anchor for its surrounding residents.

The natural and cultural assets of the Dead Sea are apportioned symmetrically along the internationally recognized border; residential; tourism; agriculture; industry; and associated infrastructure.

The peace agreement signed on October 26, 1994 by the late King Hussein and the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin laid the policy groundwork for peaceful relations and cooperation in various civil endeavors.
There is a strong relationship between peace, political stability and regional economic prosperity. Promoting economic relations between our countries is the centerpiece of the peace agreement, and is essential to peaceful relations between us. In contrast to the political situation, which is given to various “seismic shocks”, the common interests based on our shared natural resources are the basis for stable relations between municipalities and residents.

The opening of a new border crossing and the linking of the two countries highway systems at the southern basin of the Dead Sea are means to furthering economic and cultural relations between our countries, the local governments, and particularly the residents living on both sides of the border.

**Cross-border cooperation**

The peace agreement is implemented through many levels of cooperation; national government; local government; and NGOs such as Friends of the Earth-Middle East (FOEME). The Dead Sea constitutes one “package” with many common cross-border interests. In the south are two local municipalities, one on each side of the border: Tamar Regional Council and South Ghors Municipality, both facing common challenges: population increase with its attendant environmental implications; sustainable development; tourism as an economic pillar; water availability; and handling environmental nuisances such as flies and mosquitoes, flooding, and pollution.

These regional issues serve as a basis for dialogue and finding solutions to common problems. Under the sponsorship of FOEME, on January 17, 2007, the Tamar and South Ghors Mayors signed a Memorandum of Understanding recognizing the ecological and social importance of the Dead Sea, and see its registry as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as an important means for its conservation and rehabilitation. In addition, they undertook to implement sustainable solutions to environmental and economic issues through agreement to investigate the building of an agricultural compost facility, creating a cross-border peace park in the southern Dead Sea basin, and calling for the opening of a new border crossing, to further the orderly movement of both cross-border tourism and commerce.
The environment

The age of peace and cooperation offers an opportunity to develop a holistic environmental approach to the Dead Sea as a single system. As a terminal lake, the Dead Sea reacts to environmental changes with the utmost sensitivity. The drying up of the Dead Sea at a rate of one meter per year has unleashed a chain of ecological processes: the drop in the sea level affects the physics, chemistry, and hydrology of the water, in turn causing climatic changes. The drying up of the oases around the Dead Sea, particularly in the saline areas, impacts the wildlife and affects biodiversity, habitats, and population size. Such changes have direct economic impacts.

The sinkhole phenomenon along the coastline, besides being a hazard, threatens both roadways and developed areas. These visual impacts, as well as the receding of the shoreline itself, harm both the image of the recreational sites and their functioning. These have both immediate and far-reaching implications for tourism and community development in the Dead Sea area.
Restoring the Dead Sea’s sea level has become a main issue preoccupying residents of the area. Possible actions include coordinated management of natural resources and infrastructure. Proposed solutions include building a Red-Dead canal, rehabilitating the Jordan River and overall assessment of current water management practices. Communities on both sides of the border seek to establish a dialogue and join forces with government, other agencies and stakeholders to find optimal solutions to be agreed upon by all sides towards prevention of economic and social loss to their respective populations. Other regional ecological projects of shared interest are:

1. Registering the Dead Sea with UNESCO as a cross-border biosphere preserve / World Heritage site.

2. Opening a cross-border park around the southern Dead Sea salt marsh in order to protect the unique habitats of the endemic wildlife, which are in danger of extinction.

3. Treating the fly nuisance, whose source is obsolete fertilization methods still in use, by transferring information and tools on composting.

Tourism

The tourism potential of the Dead Sea rests on the Dead Sea’s unique properties, and appeals to varied market sectors: therapeutic, health, and beauty tourism; historic and cultural tourism; pilgrims; and desert tourism. The tourism infrastructure on both sides of the border complement each other, i.e., the area’s assets are spread symmetrically around the Dead Sea: the breathtaking scenery, historic and archaeological sites, the spas, and the beaches. Likewise, the demand for development of tourism infrastructure is met on both sides of the border: parallel highways enable easy access from both capitals, hotels are located along the shore, and visitor attractions abound, as do nature reserves.

Sustainably utilizing the tourism potential of the southern Dead Sea is a vital component in the area’s sustainable development plan.
A border crossing would contribute in the following ways:

1. Supporting providers of rural tourism, i.e., country lodging and accommodation, desert tourism, bird watching, dining, and recreation.
2. Increasing the number of visitors to the southern Dead Sea attractions.
3. Lengthening visitor stays and increasing income to the southern Dead Sea communities.
4. Diversifying the visitor population, exposing new market sectors.
5. Cross-border vacation packages and deals for both domestic and foreign markets.
6. Setting up a joint management, marketing, and investment recruitment mechanism.
7. Derived from the shared interest in tourism, setting up a cross-border council on nature conservation, preservation, and rehabilitation.

Dead Sea Basin Tourism map - A concept plan for "the lowest park on earth"

These joint endeavors will be based on development plans from a comprehensive, "borderless" point of view, with maximum consideration for the environment and the area's "carrying capacity".
Agriculture

Agriculture plays a central role in the area’s economy; both sides of the border are engaged in farming winter vegetables, spices, flowers, dates, mangoes, and grazing. Upon the signing of the Peace Treaty, the foundation was laid for cooperation in this sphere as well. An agricultural agreement between Jordan and Israel was signed on October 26, 1995, covering the following:

1. Priority to Jordan in importing to Israel fresh produce and flowers
2. Duty-free Jordanian agricultural exports to Israel
3. Promoting joint endeavors whose agricultural products will be considered joint and therefore duty-free

The natural constraints of land and water availability that characterize the area, as well as the widespread practice of agriculture, encourage cooperation in bilateral trade of seeds, seedlings, and produce, as well as exchange of knowledge, education, methods, and implementation of solutions such as fertilization and treatment of wastewater for irrigation.

Employment

The Tamar Regional Council has a population of 1,300 persons spread over six communities, whose livelihood is from tourism, industry, agriculture, and services, which together employ 7,000-8,000 people.

South Ghor Municipality has a population of 40,000, concentrated in Al-Mazra'a, Al-Safi and Al-Fifa, whose single main employer is the Arab Potash Company. The vast majority of the population remains dependant on farming. Hotels on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea only exist in the north and provide little income to the southern communities. Agriculture is therefore the economic mainstay of most households.

Opening a border crossing for day workers to Israel from Jordan will enable offering more job opportunities for Jordanian residents and the resulting income will benefit all sectors of the local economy.

Industry

The chemical industries that have developed on both sides of the border are of economic importance to their respective countries. Israel's Dead Sea Works and Jordan's Arab Potash Company place both countries at the head of the list of potash exporters in the world. Development plans for the Tamar Council call for establishing new research-based industries such as health tourism, biotechnology, flora-fauna agriculture, and mineral-nanotechnology. Communities on both
sides of the border seek to further cooperation that will meet the most stringent environmental regulations in an effort to ensure preservation of the sensitive local ecosystem, and to balance the needs of industry with the necessary conditions for successful tourism.

Trade

The trade agreement between Israel and Jordan, signed in 1995, aims toward economic prosperity, security, and harmonious relations via removing the barriers of economic discrimination and promotion of industrial cooperation, to name a few. In addition, it was decided to grant reciprocal priority status for free trade, conveyance of goods, domestic tax relief, and distribution of imported goods.

A border crossing at the southern Dead Sea for conveyance of goods and workers will contribute to the realization of this agreement and create conditions favorable for trade and employment for both communities.

Transport

One of the clauses of the Peace Treaty deals with transport. The sides declared their intention to allow free movement of people and vehicles, with no discriminatory taxes or restrictions. Both sides aspire to develop roads and border thruways, as well as laying rail lines. In addition, practices were agreed upon for safe movement of goods.

A border crossing for goods will constitute an economic alternative for shipping to and from the Dead Sea via the Mediterranean Sea port of Ashdod. Developing any transport routes must however be sensitive to the unique ecology of the region and to the potential for tourism using the border crossing. Transport solutions will be finalized only after public hearings gain the support of the residents on both sides of the border.

Conclusion

The Dead Sea basin is a geographic, ecological, and historic entity unto itself. Yet presently, without a border crossing, on both sides of the sea lie “parallel worlds”. The neighboring economies are based on the Dead Sea’s material and natural wealth. The value and importance of preserving this wealth are recognized by both communities.

Opening a border crossing at the southern Dead Sea is required to deepen the dialogue, good neighborly relations, and further the common interests regarding the environment, the economy, and society in general.