

## Connectivity in Crisis: The IMEC Initiative Amid the Gaza Conflict

### Krizde Bağlantı: Gazze Çatışması Ortasında IMEC Girişimi

#### Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article



Sorumlu yazar/  
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Geliş tarihi/Received:  
27.02.2025

Son revizyon teslimi/Last  
revision received:  
17.04.2025

Kabul tarihi/Accepted:  
17.04.2025

Yayın tarihi/Published:  
20.04.2025

Atıf/Citation:  
Tekir, G. (2025). Connectivity in  
crisis: The IMEC Initiative amid  
the Gaza conflict. *İletişim ve  
Diplomasi (Filistin Özel Sayısı)*,  
135-152.

doi: 10.54722/  
iletisimvediplomasi.1648361

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examines the intersection of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) with the ongoing Gaza conflict, assessing the ramifications of regional volatility for trans-continental connectivity projects. Conceived as a strategic counterbalance to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, IMEC aims to streamline trade flows between India and Europe via integrated infrastructure networks traversing the Middle East. However, the Hamas-led assault on October 7, 2023, followed by extensive Israeli military operations, precipitated severe disruptions in regional diplomacy and compromised the feasibility of planned economic frameworks. Concurrent shifts in U.S. policy and stalled Saudi–Israeli normalisation efforts have further clouded IMEC’s strategic outlook. Simultaneously, the proposal advanced by the U.S. President Donald J. Trump to establish Gaza as an externally administered economic zone has ignited intense debates over sovereignty, forced displacement, and international legitimacy. Employing a qualitative methodology—incorporating comparative case studies, expert interviews, and policy analysis—this research elucidates the complex interplay between security imperatives, power competition, and infrastructure investment within the corridor. Findings indicate that IMEC’s prospective success hinges on more than physical capital and logistical capacity; it requires inclusive multilateral diplomacy, robust risk-management strategies, and the integration of peacebuilding mechanisms. The study concludes that without durable coope-

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ration frameworks reconciling economic objectives with humanitarian concerns, the corridor's longterm viability remains precarious.

**Keywords:** The IMEC, connectivity, Gaza, Trump, India

## ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Hindistan–Ortadoğu–Avrupa Ekonomik Koridoru’nun (IMEC) devam eden Gazze çatışmasıyla kesişim noktasını titizlikle inceleyerek bölgesel istikrarsızlığın kıtalararası bağlantı projeleri üzerindeki etkilerini değerlendirmektedir. Çin’in Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi’ne stratejik bir denge unsuru olarak tasarlanan IMEC, Ortadoğu’yu kateden entegre altyapı ağları aracılığıyla Hindistan ile Avrupa arasındaki ticaret akışını düzenlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ancak 7 Ekim 2023’te Hamas tarafından gerçekleştirilen saldırı ve ardından yürütülen kapsamlı İsrail askeri operasyonları, bölgesel diplomasi süreçlerinde ciddi kesintilere yol açmış ve planlanan ekonomik çerçevelerin uygulanabilirliğini tehlikeye atmıştır. Eşzamanlı olarak, ABD’nin politika değişimleri ve Suudi Arabistan ve İsrail arasında normalleşme çabalarındaki tıkanma da IMEC’in stratejik perspektifini bulanıklaştırmıştır. Bununla birlikte, ABD Başkanı Donald J. Trump’ın Gazze’yi dış denetimli bir ekonomik bölgeye dönüştürme önerisi, egemenlik, zorunlu nüfus yer değiştirmesi ve uluslararası meşruiyet bağlamlarında yoğun tartışmalar başlatmıştır. Karşılaştırmalı vaka çalışmaları, uzman görüşmeleri ve politika analizi ni bir araya getiren nitel metodoloji, koridor kapsamında güvenlik gereklilikleri, güç mücadelesi ve altyapı yatırımlarının karmaşık etkileşimini aydınlatmaktadır. Bulgular, IMEC’in başarı şansının yalnızca fiziksel sermaye ve lojistik kapasiteye bağlı olmadığını; kapsayıcı çok taraflı diplomasi, güçlü risk yönetimi stratejileri ve barış inşa mekanizmalarının entegrasyonunun da şart olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, ekonomik hedefler ile insani kaygıları uzlaştıracak kalıcı iş birliği çerçeveleri olmadan koridorun uzun vadeli uygulanabilirliğinin belirsiz kaldığını ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** IMEC, bağlantı, Gazze, Trump, Hindistan

## Introduction

On February 4, 2025, President Donald Trump announced that the U.S. would “take over” the Gaza Strip, assuming responsibility for clearing unexploded bombs, demolishing buildings, and leveling the area. He envisioned Gaza becoming “the Riviera of the Middle East” and suggested that Egypt and Jordan would eventually host displaced Palestinians. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu praised Trump’s innovative approach (Cook, 2025). This bold declaration was set against a backdrop of intensifying global economic and geopolitical rivalries, particularly between the United States and China. Central to this evolving landscape is the India-Middle East-Europe

Economic Corridor (IMEC), an infrastructure project designed to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by linking India to Europe through vital Middle Eastern trade routes.

This paper centers on the following research question: How does the IMEC project reshape the geopolitical dynamics in Gaza? To answer this, the study adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach, systematically reviewing academic research, policy documents, and credible media reports. By focusing on the direct implications of the IMEC initiative—ranging from infrastructural investments to shifts in regional alliance—this analysis aims to provide a clear understanding of how economic corridors can serve as instruments of geopolitical leverage in a conflict-prone environment.

This paper contends that the IMEC is not merely an infrastructure project designed to boost trade and connectivity; rather, it functions as a strategic instrument of power that leverages weaponized interdependence to reshape regional dynamics in the volatile Middle East. Central to this argument is the critical nexus between Gaza and the IMEC. Far from being an isolated conflict zone, Gaza is intricately linked to the corridor's broader geopolitical strategy. Decisions affecting Gaza—such as shifts in military policy and proposals for its transformation—directly impact the balance of power in the region and, by extension, the viability of the IMEC. This analysis demonstrates that control over Gaza is not only a matter of local security but also a lever of influence that resonates across the entire corridor.

### **The IMEC within the Context of Corridor Wars**

Currently, geopolitical competition is centered around strategic connectivity, where states compete to build and control infrastructure and networks that move goods, energy, information, and people across borders. Asymmetric network structures can lead to “weaponized interdependence,” allowing states controlling key nodes to coerce others. These states can manipulate networks to gather intelligence, disrupt flows, exploit weaknesses, and force policy changes. By controlling essential global networks, they can impose costs on nations and prevent undesired actions, using their leverage to influence global economic and political outcomes (Farrell & Newman, 2019, p. 45). Strategic connectivity, in this context, goes beyond the free flow of goods and information; it highlights how states use their connections to shape global dynamics, assert power, and gain geopolitical and economic leverage, making connectivity a tool for strategic advantage rather than a neutral or purely beneficial force (Eldem, 2024, p. 106).

Economic corridors do more than merely link supply and demand. They create strategic nodes within global and regional value chains (Brunner, 2013, p. 9). Traditionally valued for boosting trade and fostering industrial agglomeration through

investments in transportation, labour, communication, and energy networks, these corridors now serve a dual purpose. Viewed through the lens of weaponized interdependence, control over these critical nodes becomes a tool for geopolitical leverage. By dominating key infrastructural networks, states can shape trade flows, coerce rivals, and influence policy outcomes.

The BRI, launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, symbolises this transformation. Comprising six economic corridors, the BRI is founded on key principles: policy coordination, infrastructure development, seamless trade, financial integration, and cultural exchange (The State Council Information Office The People's Republic of China, 2015). It operates on dimensions of economic integration, regional influence, and global geopolitical competition with the U.S. (Flint & Zhu, 2019, p. 95). While China promotes the initiative as a pathway to a “harmonious world” and a model of peaceful development—an approach that resonates strongly with non-Western countries (Eldem, 2024, p. 110), Washington views it as a strategic maneuver designed to reshape the global order, prompting responses such as reinforced alliances and targeted sanctions (Moti, 2023).

In parallel, the IMEC emerges as a focused initiative applying the same principles of weaponized interdependence. Endorsed by both the U.S. and the EU as a counterweight to China's expanding influence, the IMEC aims to establish an economic corridor that connects Europe, the Middle East, and India via a network of rail and sea routes. This corridor would link India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, Israel, and the EU. It aims at boosting trade, reducing costs, and enhancing economic and digital connectivity across the region. Introduced at the G20 summit in Delhi by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the initiative has been hailed as “a beacon of cooperation, innovation, and shared progress. President Biden described it as a “game-changing investment” (Ellis-Petersen, 2023). The IMEC represents a strategic shift in global trade, moving beyond connectivity to a more multilateral approach. Unlike the BRI, which has often reflected China's foreign policy goals, the IMEC signals broader cooperation. The EU's focus is likely on the growing Sino-Russian ties rather than isolating China due to their deep economic relationship. With Saudi Arabia and the UAE's substantial sovereign funds, they are key players in advancing IMEC. India's role as both a producer and consumer, with its ability to secure financing, highlights its strategic importance. The involvement of Saudi Arabia and Israel shows that economic interests can surpass traditional political divides (Shadid & Agarwal, 2023). Nevertheless, Türkiye and Iraq are excluded from this corridor. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that Türkiye is providing the most appropriate transit line for the IMEC (Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, 2023). Yet the deliberate exclusion of Türkiye and Iraq suggests that this corridor is part of a broader U.S. strategy to reshape regional alignments.

These strategic maneuvers are not confined to geopolitics alone; they extend into transformative economic opportunities that stand to reshape the region's energy and trade dynamics. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are actively working to lessen their dependence on fossil fuels by diversifying their economies, and the IMEC corridor is poised to play a key role in this transformation. By enhancing trade and linking electrical grids via undersea cables, the corridor supports ongoing investments in port modernisation and the development of the Gulf railway network, which is set to be completed by 2030. Europe stands to benefit as well; with rising U.S. protectionism, a need to diversify gas imports, and continued reliance on Chinese and Russian products, improved trade access via IMEC is highly attractive. Moreover, investments from Saudi Arabia and the UAE in India's agricultural sector could further bolster food security in the GCC. Although the U.S. is not a direct participant, its strategic and economic interests, such as the goal of reasserting influence in key regions are a significant driving force behind the corridor. Ultimately, the IMEC is expected to help stabilise energy supplies from the Middle East to both Europe and India, contributing to global economic stability and more predictable energy prices (Jaber, 2025, pp. 6–7).

The IMEC also counters Russian influence and addresses supply chain disruptions caused by the Ukraine invasion. As Europe looks for alternatives to Russian gas and the Middle East seeks to diversify food sources, the IMEC offers lasting solutions. Backed by the G20, the corridor challenges Russia's proposed International North-South Transport Corridor, reducing its viability and supporting US-led sanctions on Moscow and Tehran (Akademir & Adanani, 2023). Besides its economic benefits through its infrastructure development, the IMEC is a Western-led initiative, designed to improve the U.S. and EU leadership in Eurasia. Its immediate political and diplomatic impact is reshaping the dynamics of the Middle East.

### **The IMEC and the Middle East**

The IMEC did not emerge in isolation; it is supported by a series of diplomatic initiatives. A pivotal moment in Middle Eastern diplomacy was the signing of the Abraham Accords. Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan signed the accords, marking the end of their longstanding hostility towards Israel and formally recognising its existence in the region (U.S. Department of State, 2019). These agreements have shown that the normalisation of relations between Arab countries and Israel is no longer contingent on resolving the Palestinian issue. In 2022, the UAE and Israel also signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which covers more than 96 percent of tariff lines and 99 percent value of trade with Israel (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Economy, 2022). Moreover, key initiatives such as the Negev Summit, the Negev Forum Steering Committee, and the Atlantic Council's N7 Initiative have fostered regional collaboration. High-level visits and joint efforts have united leaders,

innovators, and experts, helping to solidify new partnerships. Economic ties flourished, with trade between Abraham Accords countries growing from almost nothing in 2019 to an estimated \$10 billion within three years (Grossman, 2024). Thus, the UAE and Israel became close partners in the Middle East through U.S. mediation. After the Abraham Accords, U.S. diplomatic efforts have shifted towards integrating India into the Middle East's economic and diplomatic framework.

The relations between India and the U.S. have significantly improved as a response to the rise of China. While the U.S. is decoupling from China, India is increasingly concerned about China's activities in its immediate neighborhood (Kalantry, 2024, p. 150). As part of the BRI, China commenced the construction of a port in Gwadar. While China's involvement in Gwadar may be of significant strategic importance, it may not play out in the way many anticipate. Some Indian analysts have raised concerns that a Chinese military presence at Gwadar could create a 'Hormuz Dilemma' for India, which depends on this route for a large portion of its oil imports, akin to China's 'Malacca Dilemma' (Brewster, 2014, p. 140). In 2023, the EU became India's largest trading partner, with trade in goods amounting to €124 billion, making up 12.2 percent of India's total trade. This puts the EU ahead of both the U.S. (10.8 percent) and China (10.5 percent). The EU is also the second-largest destination for Indian exports, accounting for 17.5 percent of the total, slightly behind the U.S. at 17.6 percent, while China is fourth with just 3.7 percent. On the flip side, India ranks as the EU's 9th largest trading partner, contributing 2.2 percent to the EU's total goods trade in 2023, far behind the U.S. (16.7 percent), China (14.6 percent), and the UK (10.1 percent) (European Commission, 2024). Given these dynamics, it would be India's strategic interest to find an alternative corridor to reach out European market, minimising reliance on routes potentially influenced by China.

On July 14, 2022, India, Israel, the UAE, and the U.S. launched the I2U2 Group to tackle global challenges in water, energy, health, food security, and technology, leveraging private sector expertise to drive low-carbon development and improve infrastructure ( U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The alignment of the four countries is driven by their respective advantages: the UAE's strategic position in global connectivity and capital resources, Israel's technological innovation, and India's market size and production capacity. These strengths enable cooperative efforts to reduce risks and create mutually beneficial economic opportunities amid global uncertainties (Saraswat, 2023, p. 13). The I2U2 Group plays a central role in the IMEC. At its inaugural virtual summit in July 2022, the group emphasised the importance of strategic transport links. Saudi Arabia's participation was crucial, particularly as US-led initiatives to foster diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tel Aviv gained traction. These efforts culminated in a May 2023 meeting of National Security Advisors from India, the US, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia in Riyadh. Israel, a strong early supporter of the project, saw the transport link as a "peace train" aimed at fostering regional peace and prosperity (Suri et al., 2024).

These evolving alliances reveal deep-seated geopolitical shifts in the region, as Türkiye and Iraq are excluded from these diplomatic and economic alliances. At the same time, the apparent sidelining of the Palestinian issue by many Arab states marks a significant departure from historical norms, suggesting that these countries are increasingly prioritising pragmatic state-centric agendas over collective ideological commitments. Moreover, while regional stakeholders like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, India, and Israel recognise the potential for development and integration, they remain cautious about becoming entangled in larger great power struggles, particularly given China's deep economic ties in the Gulf (Ghanem & Sanchez-Cacicedo, 2024). Collectively, these financial, regulatory, geopolitical, and technological challenges create a complex chessboard of competing interests that significantly complicates the realisation of the IMEC project. Collectively, these developments highlight how shifts in alliance structures reflect broader recalibrations of power and influence in the region. However, despite this shift, the Palestinian issue remains a persistent reminder to the world.

### October 7 Event and its Effects on the IMEC

A prolonged absence of a genuine Palestinian–Israeli peace process set the stage for the events of October 7. The expansion of Israeli settlements and dwindling prospects for an independent Palestinian state heightened tension, while many Arab nations which are still recovering from the Arab Spring, turned inward. Thus, their focus on the Palestinian issue diminished. Meanwhile, Iran's growing presence in the Middle East, accelerated after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, further complicated regional dynamics. The anticipation of an Israeli–Saudi normalisation agreement and closer U.S.–Saudi defense cooperation likely contributed to Hamas's decision to strike, as they expected Iranian backing. In this climate of deepening regional divisions, the Palestinian cause was further sidelined, with key actors like Saudi Arabia blaming internal fragmentation among Palestinian factions for the ongoing crisis (Ali et al., 2024, pp. 12–16).

On October 7, roughly 3,000 Hamas militants breached Israel's southern border in a coordinated assault targeting both civilians and military installations. They struck residential areas, an outdoor music festival, and military bases across 20 communities and several Israel Defense Forces (IDF) outposts, using firearms and explosives to inflict heavy casualties. At a festival attended by 4,000 people, 364 individuals were killed, 40 were taken hostage, and many others injured. In total, nearly 1,200 people lost their lives—with hundreds abducted and thousands injured. The scale of this tragedy forced Israel's National Center of Forensic Medicine to identify close to 1,200 bodies in a single day, a task that would normally span an entire year (Goldman et al., 2024).



In response, Israel adopted a heavy-handed approach. Despite widespread international criticism and appeals from human rights organisations, Israel continued its campaign of collective punishment against Gaza, which is a territory where nearly half the population is under 18. Over the past 15 months, at least 46,707 lives have been lost in Gaza, including around 18,000 children; a staggering toll that implies one in every 50 individuals in the territory has been killed, with many experts suggesting the real numbers may be even higher (Al Jazeera, 2025). The October 7 attack by Hamas and Israel's subsequent military response highlight the profound humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza, with thousands of lives lost and entire communities devastated. This violence has not only exacerbated the regional tensions but also deepened the division between Israel and its neighbours, most notably Saudi Arabia.

One of the foremost geopolitical casualties of the October 7 event was the normalisation process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which was essential for the progress of the IMEC. The Biden administration was working on a historic deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel, though no final agreement had been reached. Speculation suggested the deal could include concessions to the Palestinians, though details were unclear. The initiative was part of the IMEC announced at the G20 summit to connect India and Europe through the Middle East, countering China's Belt and Road Initiative. The deal would involve a U.S. defense treaty with Saudi Arabia, support for its nuclear program, and advanced weapons sales, in exchange for Saudi normalisation with Israel, reduced ties with China, and closer alignment with U.S. interests. Israel would make unspecified concessions to the Palestinians in return for the benefits of normalisation (Arab Center Washington DC, 2024). Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman shifted focus from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to normalisation talks with Israel and the U.S., but the October 7 Hamas attacks and Gaza war stalled progress. Saudi leadership faces growing pressure to align with public opinion, with nearly 100 percent of Saudi youth opposing normalisation and the majority calling for severing ties with Israel. The ongoing Israeli attacks complicate the kingdom's position on the Gaza war (Sons, 2024). It would be political suicide for Prince Salman to disregard Saudi public opinion and normalise relations with Israel without resolving the Gaza issue. Since the progress of the IMEC relies on the normalisation of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel, the war in Gaza has impacted its development.

Another impact can be seen in the spillover effects of the Gaza war, as it spread throughout the Middle East, affecting neighbouring countries. A report, published by International Monetary Fund (IMF), highlights that countries are reassessing their trade partners with a focus on economic stability and security issues. Moreover, foreign direct investment is being redirected according to geopolitical factors (Gopinath, 2024). Between October 8, 2023, and March 5, 2024, Hezbollah launched 1,194 attacks against Israel, marking the highest attack rate in its history. These were



supplemented by strikes from Iraqi resistance groups, Yemen's Ansarallah forces, and Iran's retaliatory Operation True Promise on April 14. This has severely disrupted Israeli ports, particularly at Eilat, where activity dropped by 85 percent due to Yemeni attacks. Other ports, such as Ashkelon and Ashdod, have also faced closures or damage, with Ashdod redirecting containers to northern ports. Haifa is now vulnerable to Iraqi resistance attacks, affecting its role as a key link between Asia and Europe. On April 27, Bahrain's Al-Ashtar Brigades joined the resistance, targeting an Eilat site linked to the IMEC project, further undermining the US-backed route's viability (Sweidan, 2024). The turmoil has quickly brought IMEC to a halt. The 4,800 km route now passes through countries on high alert, worried they might be pulled into the conflict. Craig Singleton, a senior researcher at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, remarked that while IMEC showed promise on paper, the region's complex dynamics were always likely to present obstacles to its implementation (The Straits Times, 2024).

Despite the persistence of conflict, the stakeholders have preserved their optimism regarding the implementation of the IMEC. In November 2023, External Affairs Minister of India Subrahmanyan Jaishankar emphasised strong interest in the IMEC during his visits to Italy and Portugal. However, the ongoing crisis, triggered by the October 7 Hamas attacks, has raised concerns about its impact on such initiatives. While acknowledging the seriousness of the crisis, Jaishankar affirmed that India would not reconsider its plans for the IMEC, stressing the importance of staying focused on the long-term goals despite unforeseen challenges (Mint, 2023). Nirmala Sitharaman, India's Finance Minister, recognised that the IMEC is confronted with geopolitical challenges, with the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict highlighting a significant concern (Deshpande, 2023).

India has become a major economic and political supporter of Israel. In 2022, a joint venture between India's Adani Ports and Israel's Gadot secured a \$1.2 billion contract for Haifa Port, which is a facility handling nearly 50 percent of Israel's cargo, featuring the nation's largest container terminal (Carmel Terminal) and its only chemicals terminal. Finalised in January 2023, this deal underscores the strategic partnership between the two countries (Biji, 2023). This collaboration is not limited to the economic realm. Amid the Gaza war, Israel is receiving weapons from India, including explosives shipped via a route around Africa to avoid Houthi attacks. IMI Systems, part of India-Israel defense cooperation, was involved in the transaction. In December 2018, Adani Defence & Aerospace and Elbit Systems opened the Adani Elbit UAV Complex in Hyderabad, producing the Hermes 900 UAV, capable of flying 36 hours at 30,000 feet, the first such facility outside Israel (Marsi, 2024).

Besides India, the U.S., which is the main architect of the IMEC, is the biggest source of weapons and financial aid to Israel. Since its establishment, Israel has re-

ceived the largest amount of U.S. foreign aid, totalling approximately \$310 billion in economic and military assistance (adjusted for inflation). While the U.S. provided significant economic aid to Israel between 1971 and 2007, almost all of the assistance today is directed toward supporting Israel's military, which is the most advanced in the region. Under a memorandum of understanding (MOU), the United States has tentatively agreed to allocate \$3.8 billion annually to Israel through 2028 (Masters & Merrow, 2024). The Hamas marked attack a new chapter concerning U.S. aid to Israel. Since October 7, 2023, the U.S. has greatly increased its military presence in the region, deploying two Navy aircraft carrier strike groups, an amphibious ready group, and adding more Air Force squadrons and air defense systems. As of August 2024, approximately 50,000 American personnel are stationed in the region, up from 40,000 following the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. The U.S. Navy now deploys a carrier strike group and an amphibious assault group to safeguard vital shipping routes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The Houthis, a Zaydi Shi'ite rebel group based in Yemen, have disrupted global trade by attacking commercial ships in the Red Sea, leading the U.S. Navy to intercept Houthi drones and missiles almost daily since November 2023. In response, the U.S. initiated "Operation Prosperity Guardian" in December 2023, sending additional military resources to the region. By June 2024, the Navy had spent \$1 billion on munitions in the Red Sea (Bilmes, 2024, pp. 16–18). Overall, Israel has received \$17.9 billion in U.S. military aid—including replenishments of weapons since the Gaza conflict began, with roughly \$3.3 billion funnelled annually through the Foreign Military Financing program for purchasing U.S. military equipment and services. As of October 2023, nearly 600 active FMF cases, totaling \$24 billion, were in place. Although Israel has historically used part of its FMF funds to procure domestic defense products, this practice is expected to be phased out gradually. U.S. financial assistance currently accounts for about 15 percent of Israel's defense budget, in addition to an annual allocation of \$500 million for missile defense systems such as Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow II, which are products of joint U.S.–Israel development. Notably, Raytheon manufactures the Tamir interceptor missile for the Iron Dome in Arizona (Masters & Merrow, 2024).

Moreover, the Biden administration has been accused of contributing to a famine in Gaza by disregarding multiple warnings from experts and aid organizations. Interviews with current and former USAID and State Department officials, along with internal documents, suggest the U.S. failed to use its influence with Israel to allow enough humanitarian aid into Gaza. The U.S. also provided diplomatic cover for Israel, blocking international efforts for a ceasefire or crisis relief, which made delivering aid nearly impossible (Hall et al., 2024). Despite the negative consequences, it seems that the U.S. and Israel are using the Hamas attack as a pretext to carry out ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population, whom they see as an obstacle to the stability and advancement of the IMEC. The developments after the ceasefire support this assumption.

## The Gaza Ceasefire and Its Impact on the IMEC

A ceasefire, announced on January 15, 2025 and effective four days later, follows a proposal by former US President Joe Biden in May 2024, with negotiations led by the US, Qatar, and Egypt. The agreement unfolds in three stages: Stage one (42 days) includes a full ceasefire, the release of 33 hostages by Hamas, the release of 1,900 Palestinian prisoners by Israel, Israeli withdrawal from populated areas, the return of displaced Palestinians, and aid shipments into Gaza. Stage two (16 days later) establishes a permanent ceasefire, completes the exchange of hostages for prisoners, and sees Israeli forces' full withdrawal. Stage three involves the return of all deceased hostages' remains and the long-term reconstruction of Gaza (Berg, 2025). This ceasefire has positive effects on the progress of the IMEC.

Then-President Joe Biden commented that with the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the groundbreaking IMEC Corridor, which spans from India to Europe via the Middle East, may now become a reality (Jha, 2025). This ceasefire was beneficial for the reestablishment of diplomacy. Although the original MoU required all stakeholders to meet within 60 days of the launch, India has not held the meeting in the 16 months that have passed (India Tomorrow, 2025). The ceasefire provided an opportunity for India to set up diplomatic contact with the regional countries regarding the IMEC.

Following the ceasefire agreement, India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, visited the UAE on January 31 to discuss advancing infrastructure projects and facilitating trade (Haider, 2025). Jaishankar also had a phone conversation to discuss regional developments and strengthen bilateral relations between India and Egypt (The Print, 2025). This was particularly significant given that the Egyptian government had initially expressed reservations about the IMEC announcement, perceiving it as a geopolitical and commercial threat to the Suez Canal. Although the corridor was unveiled only months after Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's surprise visit to India as the chief guest at the 2023 Republic Day celebrations, Cairo has gradually come to appreciate the collaborative potential of the project (India Tomorrow, 2025).

India also reached out to European countries for the advancement of the IMEC. Minister of External Affairs of India, S. Jaishankar met with Greece's Foreign Minister, emphasising that India and Greece already share a strong political foundation, societal ties, and mutual understanding. They discussed the goal of expanding modern avenues for collaboration, including increased trade, investment, and technological partnerships. Furthermore, they expressed a desire to explore opportunities for cooperation on connectivity (Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, 2025). When Prime Minister Modi and the French President Macron came together for the AI Governance conference in Paris on February, 10-12, the two leaders reflected on the launch of the IMEC during the G20 Summit in Delhi in September 2023 and expressed

their commitment to closer collaboration in advancing the initiative. They emphasised the significance of IMEC in promoting connectivity, sustainable growth, and access to clean energy across these regions. In this context, they recognised the strategic importance of Marseille's location in the Mediterranean Sea ( Government of India Press Information Bureau, 2025). Other European countries renewed their interests in the IMEC. Former Italian Foreign Minister Senator Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata described the Gaza ceasefire as a turning point for regional stability with significant implications for IMEC, suggesting that Italy, bolstered by key ports such as Trieste, could assume a central role in the initiative, and speculating that the return of Donald Trump to the White House might further boost its progress (Rossi, 2025). Thus, the perception of the countries regarding IMEC has changed after the Gaza ceasefire. This shift reflects the growing recognition of IMEC's potential to enhance regional cooperation and stability. The evolving geopolitical landscape further underscores the need for stronger, coordinated efforts in implementing the project.

The development of the corridor could also be used to support the rehabilitation of Gaza. For instance, a revitalised Gaza port, operated under international supervision, would be a major advantage for Palestinians. This port could act as a complementary extension to Haifa Port, which was acquired by the Indian-owned Adani Group in 2023, and on which many of the corridor's current plans rely (Mitchell, 2025b). Thus, the involvement of Gaza in the IMEC could enhance the living conditions of the Palestinian population, economically and politically oppressed by Israel, contributing to peace and stability.

President Trump, however, proposed a plan that would involve relocating over two million Palestinians from the Gaza Strip to Egypt and Jordan. Israel's long-standing aim to empty the Gaza Strip gained momentum with the onset of its war in October 2023, when officials openly discussed the possibility of ethnically cleansing the area. Although the Biden administration opposed forced displacement, the idea re-emerged within Trump's inner circle. Jared Kushner, who is Trump's son-in-law, and Middle East policy adviser, suggested moving Palestinians from Gaza to the Negev Desert and Egypt, then "cleaning up" Gaza, controversially arguing that Gaza was never historically inhabited (Doha Institute, 2025). In a joint press conference with Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump declared that the United States would "take over the Gaza Strip" and develop it into the "Riviera of the Middle East." A key component of Trump's "long-term ownership" plan involved relocating Palestinians from the Gaza Strip to make space for American real estate planners (Mitchell, 2025a). Secretary of State Marco Rubio echoed this sentiment, tweeting that: "Gaza MUST BE FREE from Hamas. As [US President Donald Trump] shared today, the United States stands ready to lead and Make Gaza Beautiful Again. Our pursuit is one of lasting peace in the region for all people" (2025).

One consequence of the U.S. establishing a permanent presence in Gaza through the displacement of Palestinians would be total U.S. control over the IMEC. This proposal must be evaluated in the context of the U.S. desire to control the IMEC route, which would affect the economic development of the Middle East and Europe. Europe and other regional countries will be made dependent on the U.S. after a permanent U.S. political and military administration is established in Gaza. Therefore, Trump's proposal to take over Gaza has faced strong global opposition. Saudi Arabia reiterated its "firm, unwavering position," stating it would not establish diplomatic ties with Israel without an independent Palestinian state whose capital is East Jerusalem. Countries including the UAE, Iran, China, Russia, Türkiye, Pakistan, Germany, France, Spain, Ireland, the UK, Brazil, and South America have condemned the displacement of Palestinians. Foreign ministers from Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, along with Palestinian Authority advisor Hussein al-Sheikh, also sent a joint letter to U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio expressing their full support for Palestinians (Airy, 2025). Despite significant opposition, India and the U.S. reiterated their commitment to the IMEC and I2U2 initiatives on February 14, with Prime Minister Modi emphasising collaboration on economic corridors and connectivity during a joint press conference with President Trump (Rao, 2025). However, the successful implementation of these projects also requires the collaboration of other Middle Eastern and European countries. In this respect, Trump's attempt to control the route of the IMEC through the U.S. acquisition of Gaza might create backlash for the IMEC.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the IMEC reveals that the project is not merely an infrastructural initiative, but a strategic instrument designed to reshape regional power dynamics. By linking India, the Middle East, and Europe, IMEC embodies the concept of weaponized interdependence—where control over key trade and communication nodes translates into geopolitical leverage. This corridor emerges at a time when traditional alliances are being redefined by conflicts such as those in Gaza, and its development reflects the broader contest between major powers, notably the U.S. and China, for strategic dominance.

At the same time, the viability of the IMEC is deeply challenged by persistent regional instability and evolving conflicts. The October 7 events, subsequent military interventions, and controversial proposals, including those from the U.S., have complicated the corridor's implementation by destabilising regional alliances and delaying infrastructure projects. The exclusion of key regional actors, such as Türkiye and Iraq, further underscores the political complexities involved. These factors illustrate that while IMEC holds the promise of enhancing connectivity and economic growth,

its success is contingent upon resolving security dilemmas and fostering broader diplomatic engagement in a conflict-prone environment.

Looking forward, the future of the IMEC depends on balancing economic ambitions with the urgent need for sustainable peace in Gaza and the wider Middle East. For the corridor to become a transformative catalyst for regional stability, it must evolve beyond a tool of geopolitical maneuvering and embrace inclusive diplomatic strategies that address humanitarian concerns and security issues alike. Ultimately, the realisation of IMEC's full potential hinges on the willingness of regional and global stakeholders to pursue cooperative frameworks that mitigate conflict and promote mutual economic progress, thereby transforming an ambitious vision into lasting stability and shared prosperity.



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**Hakem değerlendirmesi/Peer review:**

Dış bağımsız/Externally peer reviewed

**Çıkar çatışması/Conflict of interest:**

Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir/The author has no conflict of interest to declare

**Finansal destek/Grant support:**

Yazar bu makalede finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir/The author declared that this article has received no financial support.