

Extended abstract

Aqaba and Eilat: Twenty-Five Years of 'Good Neighborly Relations' in a Post Conflict Environment

Tamar Arieli

Eilat and Aqaba illustrate how municipal cross-border cooperation can develop and persist in a post-conflict environment, but only in narrow, functional, and low-visibility forms that remain tightly constrained by national politics, security logics, and societal resistance to normalization. The study shows that, over twenty-five years since the 1994 Israel–Jordan peace treaty, Eilat–Aqaba cross-border cooperation has evolved from symbolic visits and donor-driven projects into a modest but resilient repertoire of problem-solving practices—especially in environmental management, emergency preparedness, and labor mobility—without translating into broader social integration, shared urban identity, or robust twin-city governance.

Post-conflict border setting and peace-treaty vision

The 1994 Israel–Jordan peace treaty positioned Eilat and Aqaba at the southern tip of a regional “Valley of Peace” vision that linked security stabilisation with shared infrastructure, environmental cooperation, and joint economic development. Article 23 explicitly mandated joint development of Eilat and Aqaba in tourism, customs, free trade, aviation, pollution prevention, maritime affairs, policing, and health, constructing the twin cities as a municipal-scale laboratory for post-conflict cooperation. Yet the national relationship stabilized into a “cold peace”: formal diplomatic ties and significant state-level cooperation in gas, water, and security coexist with minimal political dialogue, recurrent crises, and strong Jordanian public opposition to normalization with Israel. This broader post-conflict environment—marked by securitization, anti-normalization campaigns, and unresolved Israeli–Palestinian and regional Arab–Israeli conflicts—constitutes the structural constraint within which municipal actors in Eilat and Aqaba attempt to craft cross-border cooperation.

Border and twin-city literature reveal borders as dynamic interfaces rather than static lines, and interpret cross-border regions as strategic actors whose institutional forms depend on national power, local entrepreneurship, and wider geopolitical context. Comparative studies from Europe and North America provide a reference model in which cross-border municipal cooperation is often backed by regional institutions and open-border regimes, in contrast to the securitized, post-conflict context of the Israel–Jordan border. This theoretical framing underlines why expectations for Eilat–Aqaba municipal twinning must be tempered and why the case is analytically useful for understanding how post-conflict borders produce partial, reversible, and often “underground” forms of cooperation.

Asymmetries, peripherality, and local interdependence

Eilat and Aqaba are both geographically proximate and structurally divergent. The cities lie roughly 7 km apart on the Gulf of Aqaba, share a fragile marine environment, and occupy peripheral positions far from their national political and economic centers, but they differ sharply in population, economic trajectory, institutional architecture, and socio-cultural composition. Aqaba has undergone rapid growth as Jordan’s only seaport which attracts significant local and foreign investment. Eilat has experienced demographic and economic stagnation, constrained by limited

coastal space, marginal port activity relative to Haifa and Ashdod, and a highly undiversified municipal economy heavily dependent on tourism and remote from Israel's core.

These asymmetries shape both the perceived risks of economic dependence and the material incentives for cooperation. Aqaba's role as a regional transport and logistics hub contrasts with Eilat's weaker port; at the same time, Eilat offers significantly higher wages, which are revealed as central to cross-border labor initiatives. Despite ethnic, religious, and socio-economic distance and the absence of shared historical urban development, both cities face similar environmental challenges (desert climate, Red Sea ecosystem vulnerability), limited alternative economic opportunities, and a strong sense of peripherality, which together generate a local perception of interdependence that motivates at least some forms of cross-border municipal cooperation.

Phases and modalities of municipal cross-border cooperation

The study evaluates Eilat–Aqaba municipal cross-border cooperation, demonstrating an incremental trajectory from sporadic, donor-driven initiatives toward more institutionalized problem-solving, followed by partial institutional regression but continued informal networking.

The first explicitly municipal and pragmatic cooperation focused on shared public health risks, beginning with mosquito control and extending to cross-border monitoring of pests, stray dogs, and other hazards. These activities were easy to justify, quick to operationalize, and encountered no formal opposition, demonstrating how “low politics” public health issues can open space for cross-border coordination even in a tense post-conflict context. Mayoral visits in 2004–2005 catalysed a more ambitious institutional phase: in 2005 the cities created seven joint inter-municipal subcommittees and an overarching steering committee to address floods, earthquakes, fires, environmental threats, infrastructure, and economic development. These committees alternated meeting venues on both sides of the border, developed joint agendas, and brought together a diverse set of actors.

Committee reports document an extensive agenda covering emergency preparedness (joint early-warning systems, coordinated training of medical and firefighting teams), environmental protection and marine monitoring, pest control, joint scientific projects, cultural and sports events, port coordination, cross-border tourism development, and especially cross-border employment. Many suggestions remained only partially implemented or episodic, hindered by visa regimes, funding constraints, bureaucratic complexity, and political sensitivities. Nevertheless, the agenda signals an emergent municipal understanding of shared risks and opportunities, and reflects a functional logic in which cooperation is justified not as peace-building symbolism but as practical problem-solving that improves local quality of life.

From around 2010, formal committee structures fell into abeyance, mirroring deteriorating national-level political climates and a preference by both states for low-visibility, ad hoc problem-solving over highly visible institutionalized municipal cooperation. Yet the study demonstrates that cross-border ties did not disappear; instead, they shifted into more discreet channels maintained by key individuals, “policy entrepreneurs,” within municipal and national bureaucracies who cultivated personal relationships, trust, and informal procedures for handling shared challenges. This informalization of cooperation preserved and even expanded strategic activities—especially in environmental monitoring and labor mobility—while minimizing exposure to domestic political criticism, especially in Jordan.

Functional cooperation: environment, logistics, and labor

The study's core empirical contribution is its detailed fieldwork - mapping sectoral forms of cross-border municipal cooperation and revealing that the most resilient and institutionalized activities are those that fit a functional, problem-solving frame, can be justified in technocratic terms, and remain largely out of the public eye.

In environmental management, joint marine-monitoring and especially oil-spill preparedness exercises constitute the most complex and multi-level cooperative mechanism. Since 1998, biannual joint oil-spill control exercises brought together municipal environmental authorities, national agencies, and scientific institutions to design and test shared procedures for detection, decision-making, and deployment of equipment in the narrow, collision-prone upper Gulf of Aqaba. These exercises reflected recognition of mutual vulnerability: both cities rely heavily on the Red Sea for tourism, and the fragile marine ecosystem is exposed to concentrated development and shipping in a confined space. Remarkably, these exercises were never publicized, underscoring the deliberate strategy of keeping cooperation hidden from public debate in Jordan and insulated from politicization in both countries. Even after formal committee activity waned, scientific cooperation and data-sharing persisted, though joint publications remained rare as Jordanian partners sought to avoid overt normalization.

In public health and urban management, cross-border pest and stray-animal control solidified into an ongoing, routine practice. This cooperation requires regular communication and coordination between municipal actors and demonstrates the "positional benefits" of border proximity, whereby each city can capitalize on the immediate spatial interdependence of pests and disease vectors to justify cooperation. Emergency preparedness initiatives—joint early-warning and occasional cross-border training—achieved only partial institutionalization and remained person-dependent, illustrating both the potential and the fragility of such arrangements in a context where staff turnover and bureaucratic inertia can easily disrupt practices.

Cross-border labor mobility emerges as the most transformative, yet still politically sensitive, form of municipal cooperation. By 2019, approximately 2,000 Jordanians were employed in Eilat's hotel sector, commuting daily under special institutionalized arrangements that involved municipal coordination, national-level approvals, and private-sector participation from hotels, transport companies, and employment agencies. Jordanian workers, drawn from across the country, accepted minimal Israeli wages that nonetheless exceeded comparable domestic opportunities, making Eilat an attractive labor market and transforming the border-crossing into a daily commuting corridor for a specific labor niche. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when the border was jointly closed, Israel vaccinated around 700 Jordanian workers from Aqaba so that they could resume work in Eilat's hotels ahead of the Passover tourism season, an episode that exemplifies both the depth of functional interdependence and the degree of controlled, state-supervised management underpinning it.

Despite significant growth in overall cross-border traffic—from about 45,000 people in 1994 to 1.2 million in 2019 at the Wadi Arava–Rabin crossing—this mobility primarily reflects tourists and Jordanian day laborers rather than routine social or commercial interaction between Eilat and Aqaba residents. Logistical and policy barriers remain substantial: the terminal is 7 km from both city centers; public bus services from the crossing were short-lived; border-crossing fees and transport costs are high relative to middle and lower-class incomes; Israelis receive Jordanian visas at the terminal, but Jordanians must apply in Amman, facing cost, delay, and uncertainty. Israel's restrictive visa policy, driven by security concerns, has repeatedly delayed or derailed cross-border initiatives

and constrains exchanges for education, culture, and business. Both states keep lists of designated “key figures” entitled to facilitated visas, which partially mitigates these constraints for elite actors but underlines the overall securitized, selective nature of cross-border mobility in the region.

Securitization, secrecy, and limits of normalization

A key analytical argument of the article is that securitization, often presumed to obstruct cross-border cooperation, can in post-conflict contexts become a precondition for stable municipal collaboration. In the Eilat–Aqaba case, national security agencies retain overarching authority over border management, yet national governments tolerate and selectively enable municipal-level activities as long as they remain functionally framed, politically quiet, and compatible with national security interests. Israeli authorities heavily regulate the border and defer to security expertise, often prioritizing risk avoidance over potential civilian and even strategic benefits of deeper cooperation, but they have also supported specific municipal initiatives, such as the creation of Eilat’s Department of Regional Cooperation and cross-border labor arrangements. On the Jordanian side, ASEZA and municipal actors promote local interests through cross-border cooperation but systematically avoid publicity, as reflected in ASEZA annual reports that celebrate development and investment while omitting mention of cross-border projects.

This secrecy protects local cooperation from anti-normalization campaigns and periodic national crises that might otherwise disrupt municipal ties, allowing cross-border initiatives to survive even when political relations deteriorate. However, the same secrecy sharply limits public awareness of emerging interdependencies and prevents the development of societal support for cross-border cooperation. The absence of visible, legitimized cooperation feeds a cycle of disappointment and scepticism in Jordanian public opinion, which sees few tangible benefits from peace and continues to oppose normalization, thereby further discouraging political leaders from endorsing or expanding cross-border initiatives.

Thus, Eilat–Aqaba demonstrate a post-conflict twin-city configuration in which municipal cooperation realizes several dimensions of border “resourcefulness”—positional, transactional, and differential benefits—without evolving into a shared symbolic space or hybrid urban identity. Positional benefits appear in pest control and emergency coordination, transactional benefits in committee-based problem-solving and marine environmental cooperation, and differential benefits in exploiting wage gaps through cross-border hotel employment. Yet the border has not become a meaningful resource for place-making or collective identification: socio-economic, cultural, and religious disparities, combined with conflict legacies and enduring mistrust, mean that cross-border interaction remains largely institutional, technocratic, and insulated from everyday social life. Cultural and educational programs are sporadic, donor-dependent, and often constrained by visa policies and Jordanian opposition to visible normalization; regional cross-border tourism is nearly absent as a marketed package, despite clear potential.

In conclusion, Eilat–Aqaba demonstrate both the possibilities and limits of post-conflict municipal cross-border cooperation. The case confirms that twin-city evolution in such contexts is slow, subtle, and reversible, yet also shows that functional, problem-solving cooperation can be surprisingly robust, even under conditions of cold peace, securitization, and domestic opposition. Municipal structures and individual policy entrepreneurs have carved out spaces for pragmatic collaboration—especially in environmental management, public health, and labor mobility—while carefully navigating national constraints and societal sensitivities. However, the relationship remains primarily institutional and elite-driven, with minimal spillover into social integration or shared identity,

highlighting the enduring weight of conflict narratives and power asymmetries in shaping the scope and character of post-conflict cross-border municipal cooperation.