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A delegation from TOBB attend a meeting in Gaza, Palestine.

Turkish firms to take part in Gaza rebuilding

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Turkish firms could soon join a \$5 billion plan to help rebuild Gaza following a series of meetings with officials from both Israel and Palestine.

"As the Turkish business world, we can fulfill this work," said Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Tur-

key (TOBB) Chairman Rifat Hisarcıkloğlu, who headed the group. TEPAV Executive Director Güven Sak and his team were also part of the group, which conducted several talks on the reconstruction of Gaza, which is under even worse conditions after an Israeli military operation in 2014.

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This August 2014 file photo shows a Palestinian man looking over destruction in Gaza City's al-Tufah neighbourhood. Turkey's TOBB (inset) recently paid a visit to Gaza and the West Bank.

Turkish companies want to rebuild Gaza for \$5 billion

Turkey's largest business organization, TOBB, goes to Gaza with a detailed plan to rebuild the Palestinian city. Israel is also warm to the project

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TEPAV, the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, noted that Gaza would not be "livable" by 2020 and launched an urban development project with academics from Ankara's Middle East Technical University (ODTÜ).

Some 50 countries promised \$5.4 billion in aid for Gaza in 2014, but only a small portion of that financing has since been utilized.

"There is more than \$5 billion promised but only some 20 percent of this has been used," Sak said. "We made a strategic plan. A

Gaza port will be one of the most important projects in this plan."

The group plans to start international design contests for Gaza and ask Gazans about their ideas for a "new Gaza."

"Turkish contractors will be an important part of this project," Sak said.

"Our contractors are materializing world-class works," added Hisarcıkloğlu. "They rank second in the world," he added.

The group met with Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and Economy Minister Abeer

Odeh, along with Israeli officials.

The group also met Palestinian Construction Minister Mufid al-Hasayne, Hamas officials and the Gaza Chamber of Commerce.

Israel had given permission to the Turkish team to visit Gaza, a sign of improving relations between Israel and Turkey.

"It is not possible to go to Gaza without the permission of Israel," Hisarcıkloğlu said after the meeting. "But we did this. This is an indicator that the tensions between Turkey and Israel are easing."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu expressed Jan. 22 his hope toward the normalization of relations with Turkey, saying they were in talks with Turkey to restore ties.

Relations with Israel have been tense since May 31, 2010, when Israeli forces raided a Gaza-bound flotilla of mainly Turkish activists, killing 10 people aboard the Mavi Marmara, the largest of the six vessels in the flotilla.

More than five years later, Turkey and Israel have begun talks to normalize relations, Turkish diplomatic sources confirmed by the end of last year.

"Our entry here also shows that the embargo is also easing. I could only enter Gaza 10 years af-

ter my previous visit. Such a project can be operative if all sides agree. However recent indicators are positive," the TOBB chair said.

Some 1.8 million people live in Gaza, while the study projects that the population will rise to 2.1 million as of 2020. The 2014 military operation left some 190,000 people in Gaza without access to electricity. Youth unemployment in Gaza stands at 67 percent, the highest in the world according to the World Bank.

Some 48 percent of the population is under 30. Some 50 percent of the industry facilities have been closed. TEPAV projects that the city will completely lack fresh water by 2020.