Egypt and Israel are Contemplating Alternatives to the Suez Canal

The now infamous blockage of the Suez Canal, along with the incident that nearly led to its repetition that occurred in early April, as well as a series of terrorist attacks committed by Israel against Iranian ships, has forced the international community to actively look for a possible alternative to this vital maritime transport artery.

Against the background of active discussion of the widespread use of the Northern Sea Route for the effective transportation of goods between Asia and Europe, Egypt and Israel joined their efforts in a bid to find a solution to the problems of the Suez Canal.

As the President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, said, the authorities of the country are working on establishing a “land connection” between the Red and Mediterranean Seas by building a network of ports and railways. He also added that the government is also implementing massive infrastructure projects, like the construction of the El-Arish port.

At the same time, the administration of the Suez Canal is considering the possibility of expanding the canal. It has also been announced that the fleet of the Suez Canal acquired the largest dredging vessel in the Middle East called Mohab Mamish. The ship was named after the former commander of the Egyptian Navy, Vice Admiral Mohab Mamish, who remained at the head of the canal administration until 2019. Another vessel of the same type Hussein Tantawi will become operational by the end of summer. The construction of those two dredging vessels came at a cost of 300 million euros. They will be tasked with constantly maintaining the canal depth at 24 meters and providing assistance in emergency situations, like, for instance, the abovementioned blockage, when all traffic was stopped.
due to a container ship crashing into shore.

Additionally, the administration is also considering options that will allow it to expand the canal, as the head of the administration, Osama Rabie recently told CNN Arabic. According to his statement, the need for such actions was demonstrated by the recent incident that happened with the container ship Ever Given and the administration will try to prevent similar incidents from reappearing.

Earlier, Egypt’s president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced the need to equip the administration of the channel with much more powerful tools by purchasing new dredgers and tugs, revealing that the cost associated with such purchases can reach half a billion dollars.

It should be added that back in 2015, Egypt built a new lane of the Suez Canal that was dug parallel to the main one. The total length of this lane reaches 72 kilometers and its construction allowed the administration of the channel to send ships in both directions. But the problem is that the second lane was constructed along the northern part of the canal, while the rest of the main one is still a one-way street.

Recently, Israel has joined the search for a solution to the problems of the Suez Canal, as its officials recalled the idea of constructing the Ben Gurion Canal, which can link the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea, bypassing the Suez Canal altogether. At the same time, Israeli authorities claim that the distance between Eilat, which has access to the Red Sea through the Gulf of Aqaba, and the Mediterranean Sea is comparable to the length of the Suez Canal, which will allow the Ben-Gurion Canal to play the role of a "stand-in" for the Suez Canal, which as a result of the recent incident deprived a countless number of companies around the world of profits.

The Ben Gurion Canal project has a long history. It was developed after the decision of the then Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser to nationalize the Suez Canal in 1956, that was previously owned by France and the UK. This project was also mentioned by the former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres in his book The New Middle East, published in the late 90s.

As stated in the explanatory note to the project, the Israeli canal was supposed to be dug across the Negev desert, from Eilat onwards, between the two mountains to the Mediterranean Sea. In addition to the astronomical costs associated with this the project, it was proposed to use 520 nuclear bombs to facilitate the land works. However, in the end, the project was frozen: nuclear explosions would cause an increase in radiation levels while the conventional way of constructing the canal rendered it senseless from the purely financial standpoint. In addition, the authors of the project explained that the Arab countries surrounding Israel will strongly object to the construction of an alternative for the Suez Canal.

Today, Tel Aviv promises to build the Ben Gurion Canal in five years and turn the future transport artery into a multi-faceted project that will include the construction of small towns with hotels, restaurants and nightclubs along the lane. However, investors remain pessimistic about the prospects of the Ben Gurion Canal, primarily due to the fact that incidents like the one that occurred on March 23 in the Suez Canal can hardly be described as a frequent occurrence. In addition, the need to use nuclear bombs to reduce the cost of earthworks reinforces their doubts.

However, this plan has already become a source of great concern in Cairo, primarily because of the fear of losing the profits generated by the Suez Canal that remain at the level of 6 billion dollars a year. Under these circumstances, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi would remind the public that the Suez Canal played an important role in world trade for almost two centuries.

Moreover, in the Persian Gulf itself negotiations have resumed on the restoration of the Trans-Arabian Tapline pipeline, connecting Saudi Arabia’s Al-Qaisumah with Lebanon’s Sidon to facilitate oil exports from the gulf to Europe. Its construction began in 1947 and it took three years to make the pipeline operational. Stretching 1214
kilometers in length, it was capable of transporting 300 thousand barrels a day initially, with the number reaching 500 thousand barrels transported daily at its full capacity. Israel destroyed a section of the Tapline pipeline in the Golan Heights in 1967, after which it ceased to function and is currently unusable, although Riyadh took the effort of registering the Tapline as an industrial heritage site last year.

According to Egyptian experts, the Tapline project will not be able to cause serious damage to Egyptian interests, since supertankers have long been used in the oil industry and their capabilities shattered the economic feasibility of such oil pipelines of the past.

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