

The Istanbul Canal: Erdogan's "Crazy Project" Raises Concerns

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is promoting the idea of building the Istanbul Canal between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara as a waterway parallel to the Bosphorus Strait. The idea itself is not new, but Erdogan hopes that its realization will be one of the major achievements of his presidency. Facing him, Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem Imamoglu, who was elected to the post in spite of the President's strong support for another candidate, is one of the leading opponents of the project. The main argument against the canal is that it will cause serious damage to the environment, and troubling scenarios also foresee an impact on the countries around the Mediterranean, including Israel. Historically, the issue of passage through the Straits has always been an international bone of contention. Building the canal could endanger the Montreux Convention of 1936, which regulates passage in the Straits, and stir up a dispute between Turkey and Russia. In addition, construction could increase Turkey's already existing tension with Greece and Cyprus – countries that in recent years have recorded growing closeness to Israel – and thus also affect Israel's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Since 2011, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has promoted the excavation of a canal between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, as a waterway parallel to the Bosphorus Strait. Last year, his determination to realize the project intensified, in spite of growing criticism of the plan. The idea of digging such a canal is not new; in fact it has arisen periodically since the 16th century, and was most recently mentioned in the early 1990s. The latest version of the canal, with a planned length of about 40 kilometers and a width of 150 meters, is intended to solve problems relating to the passage of ships through the Bosphorus Strait.

The relatively straight route of the artificial canal, compared to the sharp bends in the Bosphorus, should prevent accidents and damage to the city and the environment. An additional route between the two seas should also help reduce the traffic on the Bosphorus, which is used by over 40,000 ships every year (more than the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal combined), a number that the Turkish government expects to rise in the coming decades. This is in spite of the decrease in Strait traffic in recent years following the construction of new oil and gas pipelines. Moreover, the Turkish

government claims that it will be entitled to collect a transit toll from ships crossing the canal – a charge that is not possible in the Bosphorus because of the Montreux Convention (1936). Turkey's Minister of Transport estimates revenues from such a toll in the first phase as approximately one billion dollars annually, adding that this amount could grow to five billion dollars. Finally, the Istanbul Canal project includes not only excavation of the canal itself but also the construction of a new city along its shores, with housing for a million residents and various infrastructures that will be connected to Istanbul's new airport.

The intention to realize the Istanbul Canal project is the latest expression of the accelerated development processes underway in Turkey. Since Erdogan's first term as Prime Minister in 2003, new infrastructures have arisen throughout the country and particularly in Istanbul, where recent construction includes a new bridge above the Bosphorus, an underground railway line between Asia and Europe, and completion in 2019 of an airport planned to be one of the busiest in the world. Erdogan is proud of the progress of what he calls "crazy projects," especially with the approach of the centenary celebrations in 2023 to mark the establishment of the Turkish republic.

Thanks to the Istanbul Canal, the Turkish President is claiming his place among the national heroes. If the canal becomes a reality, he can claim to have succeeded in what many previous sultans and prime ministers could only dream about. The subject of the transit toll will be a way of showing the people that Erdogan is even more successful than the founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who restored the Bosphorus to Turkish sovereignty through the Montreux Convention, but on condition that ships could cross without paying a transit toll. In contrast, if the Istanbul Canal is built, it will be under Turkish sovereignty and will generate revenues for Turkey.

Opponents of the project showcase the plan as another example of a too-rapid advance in construction, without sufficient preliminary thought. The estimated cost of the excavation work (about \$13 billion according to government estimates, and about \$20 billion according to unofficial estimates) is perceived by many as too much of a burden on the Turkish economy, which is already growing more slowly than during the first decade of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. Other criticisms focus on the canal's environmental effects, from the perspective of nature and from the perspective of the city and its population. Studies indicate various risks that could result from connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, particularly for the latter. Moreover, the excavation work will involve cutting down hundreds of thousands of trees, which will exacerbate the problem of air pollution in Istanbul. There are also concerns regarding the supply of drinking water. Some 40 percent of Istanbul's drinking water comes from Thrace, the European part of Turkey, and the supply will be upset by the project and its

consequences. The people of Thrace could be adversely affected by the canal, which will have a considerable impact on agriculture and the fishing industry. Moreover, the creation of a new waterway barrier between Istanbul and Thrace will complicate both the movement of security forces if they are required to defend Turkey's European border and rescue activities in the more probable case of a natural disaster in Istanbul, whose western part will become an island, or in Thrace, which will be cut off from the rest of Turkey.

Finally, there is deep concern regarding corruption surrounding the project. The opposition considers the government's construction plans as a way of moving money from the state budget to Erdogan supporters through private companies that will be involved in the project with known close ties to the government. In addition, it has been revealed that some of the land for the canal's planned route was purchased by elements close to Erdogan and the AKP; the fact that these elements will earn considerable revenues when the state buys the land required to dig the canal has intensified the public outcry.

Public opposition of this kind is nothing new to Erdogan, who faced similar criticisms whenever he launched a large project but went ahead regardless. However, the Istanbul Canal has become a central point of friction between him and Istanbul's new mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu. Since his election, in spite of strenuous efforts by Erdogan to have another candidate elected, Imamoglu has led the opponents of the canal project, which he calls a "disaster." He decided to remove the Istanbul municipality from the project and appealed in court against an official report on its environmental impact, which concluded there was no reason to stop the project. At the same time, the city's public relations have been campaigning against the canal. However, the resistance within Turkish society and from the ranks of the opposition to the project has so far not stopped Erdogan, who continues to show determination to promote it, and harshly attacks those who doubt the necessity or effectiveness of the canal.

In international terms, the Montreux Convention, which regulates traffic through the Straits in peace time and war time, is critical for the countries along the Black Sea coast, and first and foremost Russia, for whom the Bosphorus is the gate to the Mediterranean. As long as Turkey is careful to maintain the spirit of the Convention with respect to the Istanbul Canal, particularly regarding the restrictions on passage of warships of countries that do not have a Black Sea coast, there apparently should not be problems for Russia. However, the toll for using the new canal will presumably make it less economical to transport goods, with negative consequences for the Russian economy. Thus, "encouraging" ships to use the canal in order to collect the toll could make this a source of contention between Turkey and Russia.

A project that will have an environmental impact on the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea will almost certainly have effects that reach Israel. Inter alia, there are fears that pollution from the Black Sea will be fatal for the Sea of Marmara, and this could affect the entire Mediterranean. In addition, some of Israel's oil supplies come through the Bosphorus, so Israel must be mindful of changes in the region, if only the higher cost of transport given the new canal transit toll. If, as the opponents forecast, the canal has considerable negative effects on the environment, this could create further grounds for tension in relations between Turkey and its neighbors, and particularly relations with Greece. In view of Israel's growing closeness with Greece and Cyprus over the last decade, Jerusalem cannot avoid the possible implications of increasing tension between those countries and Turkey, as was hinted last December, when an Israeli research ship was expelled from Cyprus's economic waters by ships from the Turkish navy, even though its activity there had been approved by the Cypriot authorities.

In the broader context, the state of Russian-Turkish relations has direct consequences for relations between Turkey and Western countries, and particularly the United States. It is true that Turkey and Russia agree on certain matters, but an increase in the number of issues of conflict, including the intensifying fighting in Idlib Province in Syria with Turkish involvement, plus support of opposing sides in the civil war in Libya and the possible addition of the Istanbul Canal to the tension, could put additional distance between the countries. Relations between Turkey and Russia have already attracted, and must continue to attract, attention in Jerusalem. The Istanbul Canal could be another layer in this complicated relationship.