

# Mideast projects boost Eurasian Land-Bridge

by Hussein Al-Nadeem

This year, the Middle East witnessed a number of important developments related to reviving the ancient Silk Road, or Eurasian Land-Bridge project, and using it to link the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

On April 29, Syria and Turkey, which were on the brink of a major war last September (because of Syria's hosting of Kurdish Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan), signed an agreement on land, air, and sea transport links between the two countries. The talks, between officials of the two countries' Transport Ministries, were held in Damascus in late April. The agreement was described in an official statement as aimed at "constructing bridges and expanding networks of mutual trust on the basis of historical relations of friendship."

## Hijaz railway revived

The agreement made a direct reference to the concept of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, stating that "the two sides bear in mind that Damascus will become a hub for a number of rail lines linking Europe, Central Asia, and Iran in the north, and Jordan and Saudi Arabia in the south." The two sides agreed to revive the Hijaz Railway, which had been built by German engineers for the Ottoman state in the early years of this century as a parallel line for the Berlin-Baghdad Railway. The rail line extended from Istanbul, Turkey, to Halab and Damascus in Syria, and to Maan in Jordan and Al-Medina in what is today Saudi Arabia. The rail line did not become fully operational because of World War I and the consequent neglect and destruction carried out by British-led anti-Ottoman forces. Part of the rail line was revived by Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Ataturk after the war, but, again, it was neglected during World War II. The relevant parts within each country were intact, but the inter-state operations were stopped for long periods because of political conflicts among Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq up to this very day.

To a large extent, the 2,000 kilometer Hijaz Railway needs to be rebuilt. The Turkish government has shown interest in financing the project, and has offered to deliver 100 locomotives and rail cars to Syria as part of a contract to help Syria start service on the line.

Meanwhile, Jordan and Syria have agreed to begin work on a series of joint transport projects, including restarting operation of the Hijaz Railway. Its reopening will be designed so as to create a transport corridor from Syrian and Lebanese

ports on the Mediterranean, to the Jordanian port of Aqaba on the Red Sea, and on to Saudi Arabia. The agreement between Syria and Jordan was concluded in early June.

There also existed a third corridor earlier this century, extending from Aleppo in Syria to Beirut and Sidon on Lebanon's Mediterranean coast, and further to Haifa, Tel Aviv, Gaza, and northern Sinai to the Suez in Egypt. This corridor, which links Europe with Africa, has been closed since the establishment of Israel in 1947 and the Israeli-Arab war which followed.

However, with the potential for reviving the peace process between Israel and its Arab neighbors, it could be reopened. Egypt, for its part, is working on rebuilding the Gaza-Fardan-Ismailiya rail lines and highways. The Al-Fardan Bridge over the Suez Canal is under construction and will be completed in the year 2001. A bridge once existed at the same spot, but was destroyed during the Israeli occupation of the Sinai in the Six Day War in June 1967. The current bridge is being built with the help of Japanese companies.

## Other projects planned

Further to the east, on the North African Mediterranean coast, filling the missing link across Libya is being seriously considered by the Libyan government. On June 9, a Libyan economic-technical delegation began a visit to China to discuss cooperation between the two countries to build "important infrastructure projects."

The main project on the agenda is construction of a 1,700 km rail line on Libya's northern coast. This will link Libya with Egypt, at the Sallum border town in the east. It will also connect Libya with Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco in the west. A tunnel under the Strait of Gibraltar is being planned to link Morocco with Spain.

In the eastern Mediterranean, in Turkey, another tunnel is being planned under the Bosphorus Strait. In this way, Africa will be connected to Europe at more than one point, and at the same time, to Asia through Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. The Libyan government has made this project one of its important priorities, now that sanctions against it have been lifted.

(Recently, the United Nations suspended sanctions imposed on Libya, following the handing over of two Libyan suspects to be tried in Holland in connection with the bombing of PanAm Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in December 1989.)

These projects will be fundamental in the course of creating real potentials for the development of sound economic relations among European and African states. These historical transport links are a source of optimism for the nations of the region. They are also an important inspiration to the much-needed development projects in Sub-Saharan Africa. The economic development and realization of peace among nations of these regions can be established through such projects, which have historically shown that they are an indispensable tie of the highest interest to each individual nation.