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## **The Gaza Strip in the Context of Israel's Ben-Gurion Canal Project**

### **Abstract**

For Israel, which until the signing of the Camp David Accords in September 1978 had remained in complete regional isolation, the task of finding routes that would provide it with unhindered access to global trade arteries while bypassing the Suez Canal has always been of fundamental importance. A logical outcome of the failure of the Tripartite Aggression involving Britain, France, and Israel was the closure of the Suez Canal — nationalized by the Egyptian government in 1956 — to Israeli shipping. This canal constituted the main artery linking the countries of Asia and Africa with Europe. It was precisely during this period that the idea of constructing an analogue of the Suez Canal between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea began to be actively promoted within Israel itself and in pro-Israeli circles abroad. The project was named after the founding father of the “Jewish state” and its first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. For various economic, political, and environmental reasons, the implementation of this idea was repeatedly postponed. However, since Israel launched a combined-arms military operation in Gaza in response to



the Hamas terrorist attack of October 7, 2023, the discourse surrounding the construction of an alternative canal has once again intensified. This article analyzes the historical prerequisites for the emergence of plans to construct a new “two seas” canal, reveals the significance of the Gaza Strip for the realization of this project, outlines the main characteristics of the hypothetical structure, and examines the objective economic and political factors hindering its construction.

At present, the idea of building a trans-Israeli canal is supported by the United States and its allies. If the “Ben-Gurion Canal” becomes a reality, it would secure for Israel the status of a global center of shipping and international trade. At the same time, Egypt would cease to be the monopolist of the most convenient route linking three continents. The results of this study may serve as a useful source for understanding the current situation at the epicenter of the Palestinian–Israeli confrontation.

**Keywords:**

Middle East; Arab–Israeli conflict; Palestinian problem; Suez Canal; Gaza Strip; Ben-Gurion Canal

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## Introduction

Projects aimed at creating a new maritime route between Asia and Europe through Israeli territory became a prominent topic in the media space and analytical publications after March 2021, when the Suez Canal was

blocked by the Japanese container ship *Ever Given*, which ran aground and created a massive traffic jam. The closure of this crucial shipping route for six days dealt a significant blow to global trade, as each hour of downtime resulted in aggregate losses for affected companies estimated at USD 400 million<sup>1</sup>. Some foreign experts began to argue that the Suez Canal was outdated and no longer met the requirements of modern shipping (Ranzan, Chislaji, Fernández, Li, Ding, Huang, Ringsberg, Gong, Fournier, Chang, Jialu, Di Xu). Quite often, the Israeli “two seas” project was proposed as the best alternative, which, if implemented, could surpass the Suez Canal in efficiency (Pezzulli, Patial, Lopi, Fisher, Gilag)<sup>2</sup>.

Many commentators linked the massacre unleashed by Israel in Gaza after October 7, 2023, precisely to the “clearing” of the northern part of the Strip in order to transform it into a site for the construction of port infrastructure for a maritime canal (Fernando, Khalil, Ridley, Šerić, Midhurst)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Vlamiš K.* The giant ship stuck in the Suez Canal is costing the global economy an estimated \$400 million per hour // The Business Insider. March 26, 2021. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/boat-stuck-suez-canal-costing-estimated-400-million-per-hour-2021-3> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>2</sup> *Pezzulli B.* The Ben Gurion Canal: Vision Amidst Upheaval // The Times of Israel. February 26, 2024. URL: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-ben-gurion-canal-vision-amidst-upheaval/> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Patial R.C.* Alternate Suez Canal (The Israeli Ben-Gurion Canal) – OpEd // Eurasia Review. November 7, 2013. URL: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/07112023-alternate-suez-canal-the-israeli-ben-gurion-canal-oped/> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Lopi F.* Suez. Ever Given grounding prompts plan for canal along Egypt-Israel border // The Guardian. April 1, 2021. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/01/suez-2-ever-given-grounding-prompts-plan-for-canal-along-egypt-israel-border> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Fisher I.* Can Israel's Eilat Become an Alternative to Suez Canal? // Haaretz. August 1, 2021, URL: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-04-01/ty-article/suez-canal-ship-eilat-cant-become-alternative-global-shipping/0000017f-e628-df2c-a1ff-fe79e1440000> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Gilag M.* Israel Is Planning an ‘Inland Suez Canal’ Across Its Desert. At What Cost? // Haaretz. January 17, 2023. URL: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-01-17/ty-article-magazine/.premium/israels-ambitious-railway-to-eilat-dream-or-environmental-train-wreck/00000185-bf24-d244-ade5-ff36aef40000> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>3</sup> *Fernando M.* What is Israel’s proposed Ben Gurion Canal and is it related to Gaza? // TRT World. November 17, 2023. URL: <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/what-is-israels-proposed-ben-gurion-canal-and-is-it->

On September 9, 2023 — less than a month before the October events in Gaza — at the G20 summit in New Delhi, the governments of Germany, India, Jordan, Italy, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and France signed a Memorandum of Understanding providing for the creation of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The land route passing through Israeli territory and the port of Haifa constitute integral parts of this corridor. In his speech at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly, Israeli Prime Minister B. Netanyahu described the G20 project as a “blessing” for the Middle East, while calling Iran and its allies a “curse”<sup>4</sup>. It is noteworthy that despite the fact that some G20 countries condemned the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza, following Houthi attacks on vessels belonging to states cooperating with Israel, cargo transportation continues through the ports of Dubai, Bahrain, and Jordan along the Israeli land route to the port of Haifa. However, the India–Middle East–Europe route has a serious drawback: it is extremely costly due to the need to unload cargo at the ports of Aqaba or Eilat and reload it onto ships at the port of Haifa<sup>5</sup>.

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related-to-gaza-16098520 (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Khalil S.* What is Israel's Ben Gurion canal plan and why Gaza matters // MENA. November 17, 2023. URL: <https://www.newarab.com/news/what-israels-ben-gurion-canal-plan-and-why-gaza-matters> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Ridley Y.* An alternative to the Suez Canal is central to Israel's genocide of the Palestinians // Middle East Monitor. November 5, 2023. URL: <https://www.middleeast-monitor.com/20231105-an-alternative-to-the-suez-canal-is-central-to-israels-genocide-of-the-palestinians/> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Šerić M.* The Ben Gurion Canal: Israel's Potential Revolutionary Alternative To Suez Analysis. Eurasia Review. November 17, 2013. URL: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/17112023-the-ben-gurion-canal-israels-potential-revolutionary-alternative-to-suez-analysis/> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Midhurst R.* Israel' destroys Gaza to control world's most important shipping lane // AlMayadeen. December 1, 2023. URL: <https://english.almayadeen.net/articles/analysis/-israel--destroys-gaza-to-control-world-s-most-important-shi> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>4</sup> *Berman L.* Netanyahu holds up maps illustrating the “blessing” and “curse” facing Mideast // The Times of Israel. 27 September, 2024. URL: [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/netanyahu-holds-up-maps-illustrating-the-blessing-and-curse-facing-mideast/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-holds-up-maps-illustrating-the-blessing-and-curse-facing-mideast/) (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>5</sup> *Wrobel S.* Houthi bypass: Quietly, goods forge overland path to Israel via Saudi Arabia, Jordan // The Times of Israel. 14 February, 2024. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/houthi-bypass-quietly-goods-forge-overland-path-to-israel-via-saudi-arabia-jordan/> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

This gives rise to the main research questions of this article: what is the likelihood of implementing the idea of constructing a new maritime canal whose terminal logistics infrastructure would be located in the Gaza Strip? Why are Israel and the United States interested in turning this small enclave into a construction site for projects of such scale? To answer these questions, the author employed a systems approach to analyze the most reliable sources, materials, and expert assessments. The study is based on the principles of historicism, realism, and objectivity, as well as on the author's personal experience of diplomatic service in the area of the Palestinian–Israeli confrontation, including in the Gaza Strip. The main difficulty encountered in analyzing the topic was that many Israeli and American documents concerning the construction of the “two seas canal” remain classified. There is not even a “Ben-Gurion Canal” entry in Hebrew in Wikipedia. Nevertheless, some information has filtered into the Israeli press<sup>6</sup>, as well as into local publications addressing the development of the Negev and Holot Halutsa desert regions in southern Israel, through which the canal route was planned to pass (Gradus, Hayuth, Stern).

<sup>6</sup> Pezzulli B. The Ben Gurion Canal: Vision Amidst Upheaval // The Times of Israel, February 26, 2004. URL: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-ben-gurion-canal-vision-amidst-upheaval/> ; Musmar F. The Ben Gurion Canal project // Israel HaYom, May 5, 2024. URL: <https://www.israelhayom.com/2024/05/12/the-ben-gurion-canal-project/> (accessed: 12.03.2025).

Moshiev D. Gormim mikzoiim ba-olam meuniyanim be-proekt taalat a-yamim [World mining experts on the Two Seas Canal project] // Davar, 27.05.1980. (In Hebrew) URL: [https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/dav/1980/05/27/01/article/141?&dliv=none&e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1&utm\\_source=he.wikipedia.org&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=%22תלעת+תלמיח%22&utm\\_content=itonut](https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/dav/1980/05/27/01/article/141?&dliv=none&e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1&utm_source=he.wikipedia.org&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=%22תלעת+תלמיח%22&utm_content=itonut) (accessed: 12.03.2025).

Givon S. Taalat a-yamim hayevet laavor ba-nativ a-dromi u-lekhaf-riakh a-Negev [The sea canal must pass along the southern route and turn the Negev into a flourishing garden] // Maariv, 10.06.1980. (In Hebrew) URL: [https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/mar/1980/06/10/01/article/156?&dliv=none&e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1&utm\\_source=he.wikipedia.org&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=%22תלעת+תלמיח%22&utm\\_content=itonut](https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/mar/1980/06/10/01/article/156?&dliv=none&e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1&utm_source=he.wikipedia.org&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=%22תלעת+תלמיח%22&utm_content=itonut) (accessed: 12.03.2025).

Bostug S. Taalat a-yamim: a-istoriya shel fantaziya [The Two Seas Canal: the history of a fantastical project] // Haaretz, 13.10.2022. (In Hebrew) URL: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/blogs/sadna/2022-10-13/ty-article-magazine/00000183-cb50-d756-adcb-cff8f05b0000> (accessed: 12.03.2025).

## Historical aspect

Gaza is one of the oldest city-states in the world. The name “Gaza” first appears in the military reports of Thutmose III of Egypt in the 15th century BCE (Katzenstein, 1982, pp. 111–113). After this conqueror-phaaraoh’s victory in 1457 BCE over a coalition of Canaanite tribes in the Jezreel Valley, Gaza became the administrative capital of Canaan (Hasel, 1998, p. 258). The Greeks and Persians referred to Gaza as the “city of treasures” or the “city of a hoard” (Pomponius, 2017, p. 59).

According to the ancient historian Arrian, who compiled a chronology of Alexander the Great’s campaigns, “Gaza lies at most twenty stadia from the sea. The road to it runs through loose sands; the seabed near the city is muddy and viscous. Gaza is a large city; it is situated on a high embankment, which is further surrounded by a strong wall. This is the last city on the road from Phoenicia to Egypt” (Arrian, 1962, p. 102).

Even in antiquity, Gaza was a major trading center, benefiting on the one hand from its proximity to the sea and on the other from its location at the crossroads of caravan routes from Egypt to Canaan, Arabia, Syria, and Phoenicia. Throughout the Roman period, Gaza was a prosperous city and received grants from several emperors. The city was governed by a senate of 500 members, and its population consisted of a wide variety of peoples — Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians, Jews, Egyptians, Persians, and Arab Bedouins.

During the reign of the Byzantine emperors, Gaza flourished and was an important center of southern Palestine (Kaegy, 2005, p. 35). The Christian philosopher Aeneas (5th–6th centuries CE) referred to Gaza as the “Athens of Asia” (Tunison, 1960, p. 11).

With the arrival of the Arabs in the 7th century, Gaza became not only a commercial center but also a spiritual and educational one. In the Old City, in the Daraj Quarter, lies one of the most revered shrines of the Muslim world, the tomb of Hashim ibn Abd Manaf, the grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad. Gaza was also the birthplace of the founder of the Shafi’i madhhab, one of the four principal legal schools of Sunni Islam. Under the Crusaders, Gaza was transformed in 1149 into a fortified castle for the Knights Templar. In 1187, the legendary Salah ad-Din returned the city and its surroundings to the rule of the Egyptian caliphs of the Ayyubid dynasty.

In 1260, the Mongols under the command of Hulegu Khan virtually wiped Gaza off the face of the earth. Its revival began only after the enclave was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in 1516.

For the Ottoman Empire, Gaza, located at the junction of three continents, was of immense strategic importance. It was no coincidence that the Turkish authorities designated this territory as a separate administrative district, the Gaza Sanjak. The period of Ottoman rule became Gaza's golden age. The city of Gaza was considered the unofficial capital of Palestine.

The American scholar Edward Robinson visited Gaza in 1838 and described it as a "densely populated city, larger than Jerusalem". Robinson noted that Gaza benefited from trade due to its strategic position on the caravan route between Egypt, Syria, and Arabia (Robinson, 1841, pp. 38–40).

By the time Gaza was conquered by the Turks, the canal linking the Nile with the Red Sea (which had existed since the time of the pharaohs of the Twelfth Dynasty (1991–1802 BCE)) had been out of operation for seven and a half centuries (Breasted, 1906, pp. 290–292). However, the Ottoman conquerors were aware that during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246/245 BCE), a wide navigable canal had been constructed from the Nile to the Gulf of Heroopolis (the Gulf of Suez). The canal was equipped with a system of locks that prevented the mixing of salt water from the Red Sea with the fresh water of the Nile. Along the coastline of the Gulf of Heroopolis were prosperous Hellenistic cities such as Arsinoë, Heroopolis, and Olbia. The canal was regularly restored and remained operational under Persian, Roman, Byzantine rulers, and Arab governors of the Caliphate until 767 CE, when the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur ordered its closure in order to prevent the delivery of goods from the East to his Arab adversaries (Rappoport, 1993, pp. 248–257).

The Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha (1565–1579), who served under Sultans Suleiman the Magnificent, Selim II, and Murad III, actively promoted one of his favored projects, which envisaged the restoration of the ancient canal of the pharaohs. He instructed the governor of Egypt to dispatch engineers and architects to assess the feasibility of constructing such a canal in order to provide more comfortable conditions for Muslims undertaking the pilgrimage



Johann Kremenetzky. Evidence of this is found in an entry from Herzl's diary dated August 23, 1896:

“I had a long conversation with the electrical specialist Kremenetzky... On the banks of the Jordan, at the point where the river flows into the Dead Sea, whose salinity is extremely high, large enterprises for the production of chemical substances could be established. The fresh waters flowing there could now be diverted and used for drinking. An alternative to this flow would be the pumping of water from the Mediterranean Sea through a canal, which would partly run underground due to the mountainous terrain... and the difference in elevation between the two seas could be used as the driving force for machinery (a waterfall with a power of many thousands of horsepower...)” (Gabriel, 2008).

The dream of constructing canals on the territory of historical Palestine found literary expression in Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* (*The Old New Land*) (Herzl, 1903, p. 190).

In 1899, the idea of linking the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean was further developed by engineer Max Bourcart, who proposed diverting Mediterranean waters into the Dead Sea from the coast at the border of Palestine and Lebanon through the Jezreel Valley to the Beisan (Beit She'an) Valley, and from there through the Jordan Rift Valley to the Dead Sea<sup>7</sup>. Due to its high cost, the plan was criticized and temporarily forgotten.

At the end of World War II, American engineers and ardent proponents of the Zionist project to create a “state for the Jews”, Simcha Blass and James B. Hayes, independently developed blueprints proposing the intake of Mediterranean Sea water from a point south of Acre and its redirection via canals and an underground tunnel beneath the mountains of Lower Galilee into the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret), which would thereby become saline. At the same time, it was not ruled out that the Jordan River's course would be diverted away from Lake Kinneret, with its fresh water directed through a canal system to irrigate agriculturally suitable lands. Excess water, via a series of artificial lakes, would then be conveyed to the Dead Sea (Blass, 1944, pp. 132–138).

<sup>7</sup> *Bostug S. Taalat a-yamim: a-istoriya shel fantaziya* [The Two Seas Canal: the history of a fantastical project]. Haaretz, October 13, 2022. In Hebrew. URL: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/blogs/sadna/2022-10-13/ty-article-magazine/00000183-cb50-d756-adcb-cff8f05b0000> (accessed: 12.03.2025).

In 1953, the Israeli authorities attempted to implement part of the American project: construction began on a canal approximately ten kilometers from Lake Kinneret to divert the Jordan River waters into it from the river's upper course. However, after work commenced, Syria lodged a strong protest at the United Nations, arguing that such an experiment could harm Syria's water-use system. As a result, in October 1953 the UN Security Council prohibited any work on diverting the Jordan River waters<sup>8</sup>. Thus, all the projects proposed in the first years of Israel's existence proved either too costly for the newly established state or were abandoned for political reasons.

### Israel's Ben-Gurion Canal project

Israeli projects for a maritime "two seas" canal constitute a collective designation for several plans involving the construction of a network of waterways. As a rule, all such projects are linked to the Jordan River Valley, the Dead Sea, and the desert strip of the Arava, as well as the surrounding seas — the Red Sea in the south and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. Most of them also envisage the inflow of fresh or seawater into the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea.

One of the most well-known projects planned to use waters from the Jordan River basin to irrigate the Negev and the Jordan Valley, as well as to pump seawater from the Mediterranean into the Dead Sea in order to stabilize its level. The elevation difference between the Jordan Valley and the world's saltiest body of water (120 meters) was to be used for generating hydroelectric power. The project also included additional objectives, such as seawater desalination, stabilization or increase of the Dead Sea's level, and the strengthening of regional peace through cooperation among parties interested in developing the Dead Sea and Red Sea regions. Following extensive public debate, the project became known as *Ta'alat ha-Yamim* ("Canal of the Seas").

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<sup>8</sup> UN Security Council Resolution No. 100. Document S/RES/100(1953), October 27, 1953. Resolutions and Decisions Adopted by the Security Council in 1953. New York: United Nations, 1953, P. 1–2.

In the second half of the twentieth century, plans for constructing a new maritime communication canal between the Mediterranean and the Red Seas were discussed by the United States and Israel in conditions of strict confidentiality after the failure of the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt in 1956. One of the earliest such projects was named after Prime Minister Ben-Gurion in the early 1960s. The project envisaged the construction of a waterway 250 km long, running from the Israeli port of Eilat (which has a 14-kilometer coastline on the Red Sea) then approximately 100 km through the uninhabited Arava Valley, and from there northward to the border with the Gaza Strip. The estimated cost of the project was USD 100 billion<sup>9</sup>, and it was projected that the canal would generate USD 10 billion annually. However, the project faced two major obstacles: first, it failed to attract investor interest because it ran in close proximity to areas of military conflict; second, it required the consent of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, all of which have access to the Gulf of Aqaba but at the time maintained overtly hostile positions toward Israel.

In July 1963, Howard David Maccabee of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, working under contract with the U.S. Department of Energy, prepared a classified memorandum entitled *The Use of Nuclear Explosives for the Excavation of a Sea-Level Canal across the Negev Desert in Israel, Connecting the Mediterranean with the Gulf of Aqab* (Maccabee, 1963, pp. 1–6). The memorandum was declassified in 1996. The author proposed excavating a canal 160 miles (257 km) long across Israeli territory, linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Gulf of Aqaba and thus with the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Because of its favorable geographical position, the “coastal plain of Gaza” was identified as the terminal point of the canal. Elevated sections reaching heights of up to 1,500 feet (457 meters) were to be leveled to sea level using a series of nuclear explosions.

The idea of linking the Mediterranean and the Red Sea acquired practical significance after the War of 1967. In six days of hostilities, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the entire Sinai Peninsula, including the

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<sup>9</sup> Musmar F. The Ben Gurion Canal; The Old New Project. Center for Arab-Eurasian Studies (CAES), 2024. URL: <https://eurasiaen.org/the-ben-gurion-canal-the-old-new-project/> (accessed: 12.10.2024).



and actively implemented employment programs for Palestinians. As a result, employment in what had formerly been a remote Egyptian province reached 98% by 1973 (Saker, 1995, p. 342). This clearly indicated Israel's intention to make extensive use of this potential in the future.

Meanwhile, the victorious euphoria that swept Israeli society after 1967 quickly gave way to mounting economic problems generated by the Six-Day War. The annexation of territories four times larger than Israel itself required enormous expenditures to maintain control. Defense spending rose sharply in the postwar period, from 19.46 billion shekels (17.43% of GDP) to 65.38 billion shekels (30.46% of GDP) by 1975<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, in addition to regional isolation, Israel's international isolation increased significantly after the war. Under these conditions, the state could not count on external investments that would have allowed it to begin implementing the plan to connect the two seas by canal.

At the historic elections for the Ninth Knesset in July 1977, the Labor Party ceased to be the ruling party; for the first time, the right-wing nationalist bloc Likud came to power. The new Minister of Finance, Simcha Erlich, decided to promote a project to build a maritime canal. He initiated the creation of a committee tasked with developing a feasibility study for the project. Erlich also approached the German government for assistance in financing the undertaking<sup>11</sup>. A year later, it was decided to freeze the project due to lack of funds.

In 1980, Minister of Finance Yigal Gurvitz and Minister of Energy Yitzhak Modai revived the work of the disbanded committee and instructed it to study three alternative routes. One of them ran between the Gaza Strip and the southern part of the Dead Sea. Ultimately, it was

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<sup>10</sup> Israel Military Spending/Defense Budget 1960–2024 / Macrotrends LLC, Los Angeles, California, US, 2024. URL: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/ISR/israel/military-spending-defense-budget> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>11</sup> Sar aozar li-Shvajz bedarko le-Germaniya [The Minister of Finance is heading to Switzerland en route to Germany] // Davar. 04.10.1977. (In Hebrew) URL: [https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/dav/1977/12/04/01/article/21?&dliiv=none&e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctx-TI1&utm\\_source=he.wikipedia.org&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=%22תלעתת+מימיה%22&utm\\_content=itonut](https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/dav/1977/12/04/01/article/21?&dliiv=none&e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctx-TI1&utm_source=he.wikipedia.org&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=%22תלעתת+מימיה%22&utm_content=itonut) (accessed: 12.10.2024).

this southern route that was chosen. Mediterranean Dead Sea Company Ltd. was established and tasked with raising the required USD 800 million in Europe and the United States<sup>12</sup>. On May 28, 1981, in the presence of Prime Minister Menachem Begin, a ceremony was held to mark the start of tunnel drilling.

The decision to build the maritime canal provoked condemnation and protests within the international community, since it was planned to be dug precisely through the Gaza Strip, as well as because of the possible consequences for the use of the Jordan River's water resources by Jordanian farmers. Strong objections were voiced in Jordan; Egypt and the United Kingdom condemned the project. The UN General Assembly also adopted a resolution stating that the construction of the canal violated international law and called on Israel to immediately cease any actions and/or plans for earthworks aimed at implementing this project<sup>13</sup>. At the end of 1985, under the pretext that the project to connect the two seas required far more substantial capital investments, the Israeli government decided to halt its implementation, and the Med-Dead Company was dissolved<sup>14</sup>.

In addition, many factors pointed to serious environmental risks inherent in Israeli projects to construct maritime canals. These risks include the fact that the mixing of seawaters could cause abrupt changes in the seas under consideration; there is a high probability of seawater intrusion into groundwater along the route of pipeline construction; and

<sup>12</sup> Mimun aproekt taalat ayamim yutal al' abonds [The financing of the Canal of the Seas will be carried out through the issuance of bonds] // Davar. 23.01.1981. (In Hebrew) URL: <https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/dav/1981/01/23/01/article/38?&dliw=none&e=-----he-20--1--img> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>13</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 39/101, "Decision of Israel to Construct a Canal Linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Dead Sea". Resolutions of the Thirty-Ninth Session of the General Assembly. New York: United Nations, 1984, p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> Shorer O. Proekt taalat ayamim tava be-mitat neshika [The Canal of the Seas project is stalled due to lack of funding] // Maariv. 23.12.1985. (In Hebrew) URL: [https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/mar/1985/12/23/01/article/100?&dliw=none&e=-----he-20--1--imgtxIN%7ctx-TI1&utm\\_source=he.wikipedia.org&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=%22תלעת+תימיה%22&utm\\_content=itonut](https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/mar/1985/12/23/01/article/100?&dliw=none&e=-----he-20--1--imgtxIN%7ctx-TI1&utm_source=he.wikipedia.org&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=%22תלעת+תימיה%22&utm_content=itonut) (accessed: 12.10.2024);

there is also the risk of disrupting the fragile ecosystem of the Red Sea as a result of desalination operations. Environmental risks were studied in detail in 2009–2012 by expert groups appointed by the World Bank. The reports presented contained the following conclusions: connecting the Mediterranean, Red, and Dead Seas by canal branches is entirely permissible and will not have negative environmental consequences<sup>15</sup>. No changes in the Dead Sea will occur if up to 400 million cubic meters per year are discharged into it, and there is a possibility of preventing seawater intrusion into groundwater. With careful planning and construction, no serious changes in the Red Sea were expected due to the relatively limited scale of water withdrawal<sup>16</sup>.

During a short lull in the Palestinian–Israeli confrontation in December 2013, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority signed a memorandum of understanding on resolving water issues between the countries. The agreement provided for the restoration of a desalination plant in Aqaba and the construction of an Israeli–Jordanian pipeline to transport brine from the desalination plant to the Dead Sea. This project could have become the first step toward building a maritime canal from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea; however, after Israel launched a military operation to eliminate Hamas in late 2023, Jordan announced the denunciation of the agreement; earlier, the Palestinians had also withdrawn from participation in it<sup>17</sup>.

### **The economic aspect of linking the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea**

For Israel's economy, the issue of building various transport arteries between the Mediterranean and Red Seas has always been relevant. As early as 1970, a special oil pipeline was built for the re-export of oil bypassing

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<sup>15</sup> Red Sea – Dead Sea Water Conveyance Study Program. Final Report. Washington: The World Bank, 2011. P. 9, 283.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. P. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Red Sea water desalination project moving ahead // The Jordan Times. 17.12.2013. URL: <http://jordantimes.com/red-sea-water-desalination-project-moving-ahead> (accessed: 12.10.2024);

the Suez Canal. It connects the cities of Eilat and Haifa. At present, the total length of the pipeline is 418 km, and its capacity is about 500,000 barrels (28 million tons) per year<sup>18</sup>. Crude oil is delivered by tankers to the port of Ashkelon; part of it is then pumped through the pipeline to the refinery in Haifa, while another part goes to the terminal in Eilat, where it is reloaded onto tankers for re-export to Asia. During the Suez Crisis, Israel actively used the highway connecting the ports of Eilat and Ashkelon for exporting goods.

In 1959, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion approved a plan for the development of the Negev, which envisaged the construction of a railway from the port of Eilat to the port of Ashkelon (the Med-Red project)<sup>19</sup>. France showed great interest in this project. Subsequently, the project was repeatedly discussed at the ministerial level but was constantly postponed for financial reasons. Only in 2013 did the cabinet of B. Netanyahu approve the plan to build the Med-Red railway connection. China, India, Canada, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and the United States expressed readiness to participate in financing the project. It was expected that after the opening of the line, the flow of tourists to Eilat would double. The transportation of about 2.5 million tons of cargo and 140,000 vehicles per year was also envisaged. According to the project, in addition to serving the local market, the railway would serve Asian countries transporting goods to Europe, and in this regard Med-Red could pose serious competition to the Suez Canal<sup>20</sup>. However, due to the high cost of the project (40 billion shekels, or about USD 11.4 billion), it was again postponed. According to experts, the railway from Eilat to Ashdod would not become profitable, unlike a maritime canal,

<sup>18</sup> The Eilat Ashkelon Pipeline Co. Ltd. (EAPC). Ashkelon: EAPC, 2013. P. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Tohmit humash le-pituah a-Negev [A five-year plan for the development of the Negev] // HaIzofe. 16.03.1959. (In Hebrew) URL: <https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/?a=is&oid=hzh19590316-01&type=staticpdf&e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>20</sup> *Bar-Eli* A. Arakevet le-Eilat: anesia le-Tel'-Aviv — shaataim va-hezi; akav jesharet 3,5 million nosim ba-shana [A railway to Eilat: travel to Tel Aviv — two and a half hours; the line will serve 3.5 million passengers per year] // TheMarker. 22.11.2010. (In Hebrew) URL: <https://www.themarker.com/dynamo/cars/2010-11-22/ty-article/0000017f-ec5c-ddba-a37f-ee7e60680000> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

since unloading from a ship to railcars and subsequent loading from railcars back onto a ship would require the costs disproportionate to the cost of building Med-Red. The President of the Israeli Chamber of Shipping, Yoram Sebbah, like many other opponents of the railway project, argues that unloading 20,000 containers (a single vessel's cargo) onto a train capable of taking no more than a hundred containers requires complex and expensive logistics, and in this respect Med-Red will never be able to compete with a maritime canal<sup>21</sup>.

In 2020, with the mediation of the administration of U.S. President Trump, it was possible to agree on the principles of normalizing relations between Israel and four countries of the region: the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar, with a number of significant reservations, joined the supporters of the Abraham Accords, from which the political component was removed (Krylov, Fedorchenko, Maryasis, 2022, p. 137). Israel expected that the new U.S. Middle East initiative would allow it to purchase oil and other petroleum products from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, previously inaccessible due to sanctions restrictions. Just one month after the signing of the cooperation agreement between Israel and the UAE in October 2020, the Israeli state company Europe Asia Pipeline Co (EAPC) and the UAE-based MED-RED Land Bridge Ltd. signed an agreement on transporting crude oil and fuel from the Persian Gulf to Western markets from Eilat to the port of Ashkelon. However, Israel's Supreme Court upheld a lawsuit filed by local environmental activists and froze the deal due to possible risks to the environment and the ecology of the Mediterranean and Red Sea basins<sup>22</sup>. The court's decision once again confirmed that neither a pipeline nor a railway line could become a worthy alternative to a maritime canal.

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<sup>21</sup> *Fisher I.* Can Israel's Eilat Become an Alternative to Suez Canal? // Haaretz. April 1, 2021. URL: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-04-01/ty-article/suez-canal-ship-eilat-cant-become-alternative-global-ship-ping/0000017f-e628-df2c-a1ff-fe79e1440000> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>22</sup> *Rabinovitch A.* Scrap UAE pipeline deal over oil risks to Red Sea, Israeli minister says // Reuters, November 16, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/israels-energy-minister-calls-cancel-oil-pipeline-deal-with-uae-firm-2021-11-16/> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

## Israel's intervention in the Gaza Strip and the renewed relevance of the idea of building the Ben-Gurion Canal

On April 2, 2021, Israel announced that work on laying the Ben-Gurion Canal would begin by June 2021 and could take several years. It was assumed that the project would be supported by the United States, as well as Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries interested in reducing the cost of energy transit<sup>23</sup>. However, neither Washington nor Riyadh supported the Israeli initiative.

The issue of building an analogue of the Suez Canal was raised again after the start of Israel's asymmetric military operation in the Gaza Strip in October 2023. The reoccupation of the enclave, in addition to eliminating Hamas, opened up broad prospects for implementing the old idea<sup>24</sup>. Evidence in favor of the view that something else was hidden behind Israel's argument about the need to destroy Hamas was also provided by the fact that the most intensive bombardments were carried out precisely in northern Gaza, that is, in the area of the supposed terminal point of the canal on its way to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as by the fact that Israeli forces persistently urged Palestinians to leave precisely the northern areas of the Strip. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, by early 2025, 1.1 million and 685,000 forcibly displaced persons had accumulated in the southern cities of Rafah and Khan Yunis, respectively, eking out a meager existence on an area of 63.1 square kilometers. Population density in Rafah on the eve of the aggression was 4,360 people per square kilometer, whereas it has now reached approximately 17,500 people per square kilometer<sup>25</sup>. The population living in the governorates of Gaza and North Gaza, according to the same source, now amounts to no more than half a million

<sup>23</sup> *Musmar F.* The Ben Gurion Canal: multi-billion-dollar investment project // Global Arab Network, May 22, 2024. URL: <https://www.english.globalarab-network.com/2024/05/22/the-ben-gurion-canal-multi-billion-dollar-investment-project/> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>24</sup> *Musmar F.* The Ben Gurion Canal project // Israel HaYom, May 5, 2024. URL: <https://www.israelhayom.com/2024/05/12/the-ben-gurion-canal-project/> (accessed: 12.03.2025).

<sup>25</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). 1.1 million Palestinians are in Rafah Governorate. April 25, 2024. URL: <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=5748> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

people. It is precisely these administrative areas that have suffered the most severe destruction; all infrastructure has been completely destroyed there, and many of the survivors are likely to leave these places as well.

An indirect confirmation that Israel was looking for a suitable pretext for intervention in Gaza is the “unexpected” failure of all its intelligence services, which allegedly had no information about the terrorist raid by Hamas militants beyond the “security wall” on October 7, 2023. Some serious Western analysts are convinced that Mossad and other Israeli services had been warned by U.S. and Egyptian intelligence about the impending invasion from Gaza into Israeli territory but took no action to prevent the violence<sup>26</sup>. The construction of an expensive canal just a few dozen kilometers from a sector which, according to the lexicon of Israeli politicians, is a “terrorist entity”, would hardly have attracted interest from potential sponsors. The elimination of Hamas and the establishment of full Israeli control over Gaza, on the other hand, would create entirely new realities on the ground for promoting the Ben-Gurion Project.

The canal, without any doubt, is beneficial for Israel from an economic standpoint. It will clearly be more efficient than the Suez Canal, since it will be built using modern technologies, and its capabilities will allow a larger number of vessels to pass thanks to simultaneous two-way navigation of large ships along two branches. Each proposed branch of the canal will have a depth of 50 meters, which is 10 meters deeper than the Suez Canal, and a width of about 200 meters (the bottom width of the Suez Canal is 45–60 meters)<sup>27</sup>. Super-tankers and vessels 300

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<sup>26</sup> *Bergman R., Goldman A.* Israel Knew Hamas’s Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago // The New York Times, December 2, 2023. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-attack-intelligence.html> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Beaumont P.* Israeli intelligence leak details extent of warnings over Hamas attack // The Guardian, 28 November, 2023. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/28/israeli-military-had-warning-of-hamas-training-for-attack-reports-say> (accessed: 12.10.2024); *Israeli army knew of Hamas's plans on 7 October, report finds* // Middle East Eye, 18 June, 2024. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israeli-army-knew-hamas-plans-report-finds> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>27</sup> *Musmar F.* The Ben Gurion Canal: Multi-Billion-Dollar Investment Project // Fikir Academy for strategic Studies, May 23, 2024. URL: <https://fikirand-strategicconsultationsacademy.com/perspectives-papers/f/the-ben-gurion-canal-multi-billion-dollar-investment-project>(accessed: 12.10.2024).

meters long and 110 meters wide will be able to pass simultaneously in both directions along the branches.

In addition, unlike the Suez Canal, which is located along sandy shores and constantly requires dredging, the Israeli canal will run through solid rocky ground, which will significantly reduce maintenance costs. Israel plans to build small towns, hotels, restaurants, and commercial zones along the canal's route.

According to preliminary estimates, construction of the trans-Israeli waterway could cost USD 55 billion and will pay for itself within ten years<sup>28</sup>. If the military operation to clear Gaza of all those resisting the Israeli occupation is completed in the manner openly declared by B. Netanyahu and members of his inner circle<sup>29</sup>, this would make it possible to significantly shorten the canal's route, reduce costs, and decrease the time required for its construction. Some experts believe that Israel's profit from operating the canal would amount to USD 6 billion per year<sup>30</sup>, while Egypt's annual revenue from the Suez Canal would fall from USD 9.3 billion<sup>31</sup> to

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<sup>28</sup> Gellendter J. An Israeli Suez Canal // The Jerusalem Post, March 7, 2015. URL: <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/an-israeli-suez-canal-393225> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>29</sup> In his public speech on October 28, 2023, B. Netanyahu quoted the Torah, comparing Palestinians to the Amalekites, enemies of the Israelites three millennia ago: "Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant..." (1 Samuel 15:1–3). Sharon J. PM's office says it's 'preposterous' to say his invoking Amalek was a genocide call // The Times of Israel, January 16, 2024. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pms-office-says-its-preposterous-to-say-invoking-amalek-was-a-genocide-call/>; Netanyahu's references to violent biblical passages raise alarm among critics // NPR, November 7, 2023. URL: <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/07/1211133201/netanyahus-references-to-violent-biblical-passages-raise-alarm-among-critics>

<sup>30</sup> Šerić M. The Ben Gurion Canal: Israel's Potential Revolutionary Alternative To Suez Analysis // Eurasia Review. November 17, 2023. URL: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/17112023-the-ben-gurion-canal-israels-potential-revolutionary-alternative-to-suez-analysis/> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

<sup>31</sup> Suez Canal annual revenue hits record \$9.4 billion, chairman says // Reuters, June 21, 2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/suez-canal-annual-revenue-hits-record-94-bln-chairman-2023-06-21/> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

USD 4 billion<sup>32</sup>. The emergence of an alternative Israeli canal threatens to seriously undermine the entire Egyptian economy and set the country back in its development by many decades.

## Conclusion

Israel, the United States, and their NATO allies are interested, for geopolitical, strategic, and economic reasons, in the emergence of a new short route from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. These states have always viewed the transfer of the Suez Canal under Egypt's sovereignty with disapproval. This irritation has only intensified due to the refusal of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government to participate in Western sanctions policy against Russia. As of the end of 2023, trade turnover between Russia and Egypt increased by 25 percent compared to the same period of the previous year and exceeded USD 7 billion. Egypt became a full member of BRICS on January 1, 2024, and the West is dissatisfied with a situation in which Cairo directly, and Russia and China indirectly, dominate such a strategically important zone as the Suez Canal.

In the context of the reformatting of the geopolitical situation in the region, Egypt's rapprochement with Russia and China, and the growing threat to shipping from the Houthis on the approaches to the Suez corridor, the United States may well support the idea of constructing an alternative canal. It is no coincidence that after being elected president once again, D. Trump received B. Netanyahu as his first foreign guest. With his characteristic assertiveness, D. Trump proposed an updated "deal of the century", which this time envisages:

1. the establishment of U.S.–Israeli control over the entire Gaza Strip;
2. demining operations and the clearing of the territory of destroyed buildings;
3. the creation of conditions for future economic development;

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<sup>32</sup> *Patial R.C.* Alternate Suez Canal (The Israeli Ben Gurion Canal) — OpEd // Eurasia Review, November 7, 2023. URL: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/07112023-alternate-suez-canal-the-israeli-ben-gurion-canal-oped/> (accessed: 12.10.2024).

4. the creation of an unlimited number of jobs and housing for the population of this area, which Donald Trump called the “future Middle Eastern Riviera”.

According to Trump’s plan, the two-million-strong Palestinian population of the Strip must undergo a transfer procedure to other countries, among which Egypt, Jordan, and Somalia are named. Under the pretext of protecting their economic interests, American politicians (like Britain and France, which once owned the Suez Canal) will gain a new incentive to strengthen their military presence in the region and new opportunities to enhance their control over the most important international trade routes. For B. Netanyahu and his entourage, involving the United States in establishing a “peaceful order” in the region through the de-Palestinianization of an extremely important strategic point of the globe, namely the Gaza Strip, opens a wide window of opportunity for implementing the plan to build the “Ben-Gurion Canal”. If Israel’s current share of global trade cargo transportation passing through the Red Sea is 2 percent, then the implementation of plans to build a maritime route alternative to the Suez Canal would make it possible to significantly increase this state’s revenues from the transit of goods between the two seas.

### **Conflict of interests**

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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