

Egypt Again Connects Africa to Eurasia

by Hussein Al-Nadeem

Almost unnoticed by international media fixated on the “war on terrorism” in Afghanistan, two events with major strategic and political implications took place in Egypt in October and November. The first two bridges built in decades over the Suez Canal, linking Africa to Eurasia, were inaugurated on Oct. 9 and Nov. 14. The events marked the 28th anniversary of the Oct. 6, 1973 war, when the Egyptian army crossed the Suez Canal to liberate Sinai from the Israeli occupation.

The first of the two, “The Mubarak Peace Bridge,” was inaugurated by President Hosni Mubarak and former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto of Japan, on Oct. 9. This suspension bridge for car traffic has a 630-meter span which rises 70 meters above the Suez Canal, allowing gigantic ships such as oil tankers to pass through the canal unhindered. The bridge as a whole extends 9 kilometers (5.5 miles), linking the western bank of the Suez at Al-Qantara, about 25 kilometers north of Al-Ismailia City, to the Sinai Peninsula.

Egyptian-Japanese Project

The idea was presented by President Hosni Mubarak to the Japanese government in 1995 in Tokyo. The Japanese government financed 60% of the project through a grant. Con-

struction began in 1997 to “build this bridge between Africa and Asia,” according to the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram*. Hashimoto was invited to the inauguration, because he was prime minister at the time the decision was taken. He described the bridge as “great both in beauty and magnitude; [it] deserves to be called the appropriate bridge to connect nations and cultures in the continents of Asia and Africa.” Egyptian Minister of Transport Ibrahim El-Demiri said at the ceremony that the bridge is indicative of the deep-rooted relations binding the peoples and governments of Japan and Egypt. He added that the giant project was part of a master plan.

The project, including a nearby rail bridge of the same height, is part of efforts to encourage Egyptians to move out of the narrow Nile Valley, where most of Egypt’s 67 million people live. “With the opening of this bridge, life will change on both sides [of the Suez Canal] in that new inhabitants in the area can exploit its natural resources, which have been waiting for a new generation of Egyptians,” Demiri said. He added that this “will entail an increase of the population in Sinai to 3.2 million by 2017” (from 340,000 now).

The second major event took place Nov. 14, when Mubarak inaugurated the Al-Ferdan railway bridge, making the 101 km (60 mile) rail connection from Ismailia to Beir El-Abd in the Sinai Peninsula. It will help increase domestic trade, reconstruct the Sinai and connect it with the motherland. Construction of the new Al-Ferdan bridge was part of the 1994 National Project for the Development of the Sinai, requiring linking the banks of the Suez Canal between the Nile Valley and the Sinai. The new bridge is considered the main pivot of agricultural, industrial and urban development in the Sinai, especially after the digging of the Al-Salam irrigation canal to open up new cultivation there. The Al-Ferdan location was chosen to coincide with a 225 km railway being built from Ismailia to Rafah, passing by Al-Arish.

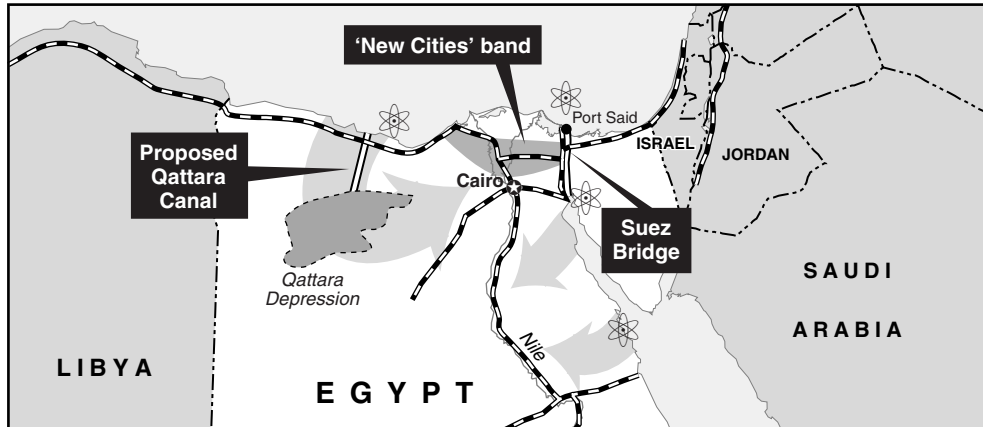
According to *Al-Ahram* weekly, the Al-Ferdan Bridge is 640 meters long, making it the world’s longest rotating steel bridge (the bridge opens by rotating two arms toward each shore, thus allowing ships to pass). Project director Mina Nashed says the bridge was constructed by a consortium of Egyptian, Belgian, and German companies, beginning in November 1997, and is now essentially complete. By mid-May, a computerized system controlling the bridge will be evaluated, and its rotation tested. The Al-Ferdan Bridge Consortium comprises the German Krupp Stahlbau and Krupp Fordertechnik firms, Besix of Belgium, and Orascom of Egypt.

This bridge carries a single rail line and two traffic lanes, which are to be open from 9 a.m. to noon and 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. daily. The first train crossed the bridge on Nov. 14, carrying President Mubarak and reporters, from Al-Ferdan on the west bank of



The first of the bridges across the Suez Canal, a joint project of Egypt and Japan, is opened on Oct. 9. The Mubarak Peace Bridge was inaugurated by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (right) and former Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto.

Suez Bridges In Egypt's Development



The Egyptian government considers opening the Suez bridges part of a development plan: creating migration away from the Nile Valley into new cities areas; linking Egypt, Sudan, and northwest Africa by rail toward Eurasia: the Orient Express.

the canal to Al-Qantara Sharq on the eastern bank. According to Osama Ogeen, director of the bridges department at the Egyptian Railway Authority, the train will go 50 kilometers north from Al-Ferdan, and then follow the Mediterranean coast east across Lake Bardawil until it reaches Rafah on the Egyptian-Israeli border.

Ogeen says construction work on 8 of the 14 stations on the line has already been completed. "However, due to the current setbacks in the peace process, the railroad will terminate at El-Arish," she added. "The extension on to Europe will also be on hold until the region reaches a peaceful settlement."

'The Route From North Africa To Europe'

"On the whole, the bridge and the railroad will work as a main part of the Northern Coastal Highway, a land transportation route between North Africa and Europe," stated Dr. El-Demeiri. The second phase of the project, which will run from the northern Nile Delta town of Damietta to Al-Salloum, on the Libyan border, was inaugurated last year by President Mubarak. The Railway Authority's Ogeen adds that with the railroad traversing the Sinai, it will nurture the growth of communities along the way. A spur has been constructed to connect the railroad with the new port at East Port Said, to serve the industrial zone newly established there, in cooperation with China.

Al-Ferdan Bridge was made famous by the legendary Orient Express, which used to cross the bridge en route to Europe early in the 20th Century. The railroad used by the Orient Express was first built in 1883 to serve the British troops occupying Egypt in 1882. The trip to Rome used to take 75 hours, beginning at Al-Qantara East and passing through Rafah, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey until it reached Italy.

This is the fourth time this bridge has been built. As a witness to the ugly politics of the 20th Century, the bridge was destroyed three times; in 1943 during World War II;

in 1956 during the Anglo-French-Israeli aggression against Abdul Nasser's Egypt; and in 1967 in the Israeli-Arab war. Reflecting on this fact, President Mubarak told reporters after the inauguration ceremony: "To those Israelis who cast doubt upon the peace with Egypt, I would say, 'Do we make peace between Egypt and Israel and build a bridge that costs 400 million Egyptian pounds [\$100 million] and a railway which costs more than a billion, so they would be bombed?' " He emphasized that "this project is the best proof that Egypt is walking on the road to peace. We are against war, and would not fight, unless we are being attacked."

Mubarak also stressed that this is not merely a local Egyptian project: "When we think about a project such as this railway, we don't look at it in a short-sighted way. We don't want this train to stop at Bir Al-Abd. No. It should continue to Al-Arish and Rafah, and later, when the situation is stable again, to Israel and its neighbors, to Istanbul. And from Istanbul, the Orient Express would become reality again. This shows how keen Egypt is to achieve peace. I heard that the Germans want to help build part of [the Orient Express]."

This project has become part of the government's conscious planning for Egypt to become the bridge between Africa and Eurasia. The domestic development factor is of enormous significance, turning the Sinai and the New Valley—through the transfer of water and building of new urban centers in the Sinai and west of the Nile Valley along the Toshka canal—into modern agro-industrial centers.

These centers are along the main arteries of the Afro-Eurasian Land-Bridge, extending from Southwest Asia and Europe across the Near East to the Sinai; from there crossing the Suez Canal to Port Said in the north and along the Mediterranean coast to North Africa and Spain. To the south, it will expand through Sudan to the Horn of Africa, East Africa and the Sub-Saharan Africa. Under just international economic-financial relations, such a project becomes the best kind of vehicle for peace and development.