

Turkey Launches Rail Electrification

by Richard Freeman

“Dear Passengers, please take your seats. The train is about to take off.” This was the announcement made by Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan on the morning of March 14, as Turkey’s new, totally electrified High Speed Train (HST) departed Ankara station to begin commercial operation. Later during its maiden trip, Erdogan announced that the train had reached its top speed of 252 kilometers (157 miles) per hour, to applause by the passengers.

Turkey’s HST is part of an ambitious government program to modernize its national transport system, and, at the same time, to create an indispensable link to the worldwide Land-Bridge, including the first-ever tunnel to connect Asia with Europe, via the Bosphorus Straits. On March 12, Turkey’s Transportation Undersecretary Habib Soluk declared, “We’ll connect Beijing to London by 2023,” a significant expanse of the Eurasian Land-Bridge. Soluk emphasized Turkey’s role as a hub for international rail connections linking Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus.

Other nations are spurred by Turkey’s activity: Iran has recently announced bold plans to electrify its rail system.

Turkey’s increasingly pivotal diplomatic role throughout Southwest Asia—for example, it is mediating peace discussions among Israel, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority—has as its base an audacious rail-physical economic foundation.

Upgrading Turkey to 21st-Century Rail

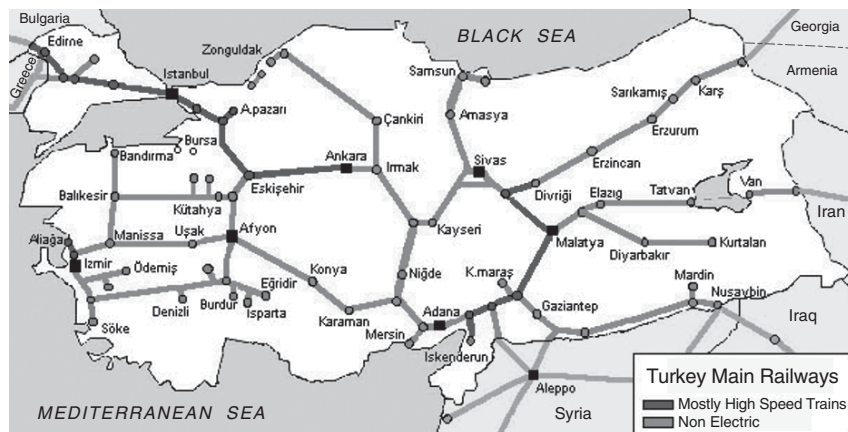
Starting with its March 14 maiden trip, Turkey’s HST will run from Turkey’s capital, Ankara, to the city of Eskisehir, 245 km away; however, by the end of this year, the completion of the Eskisehir-to-Istanbul portion of the rail line will make it possible to travel by HST from Ankara to Istanbul, Turkey’s largest city (12.6 million people), a distance of 533 km (331 miles). The revolutionary effect of electrification will be manifest: This trip previously took 6 to 7 hours, and with electrification it will take 3 hours and 10 minutes.

Just as revolutionary will be the rail tunnel linking Asia with Europe under the Bosphorus Strait, a project first proposed in 1860. On Feb. 23, engineers announced that after five years of simultaneous boring from both ends, they had completed the first stage of a submersed tunnel, 13.6 km (8.4 miles) in length. The tunnel now has to be lined, and engineers will create train stations, including one that will be carved out of rock. The finished link, called the Marmaray link, will be completed by 2012. The rail tunnel will replace a ferry which takes tens of thousands of people across the Bosphorus every day.

According to planners, the HST would transport passengers by day (more than 1 million per day in each direction), and freight by night. The plan of the Turkish State Railway, TCDD, which oversees the operation, is to extend the HST westward to Turkey’s border with Bulgaria,

where, with appropriate building in that country, it could extend to the heart of Europe (see **Figure 1**). The TCDD is also building the HST from the city of Sivas in the south, to the city of Iskenderun, which is a few hundred kilometers across the border from Aleppo, Syria.

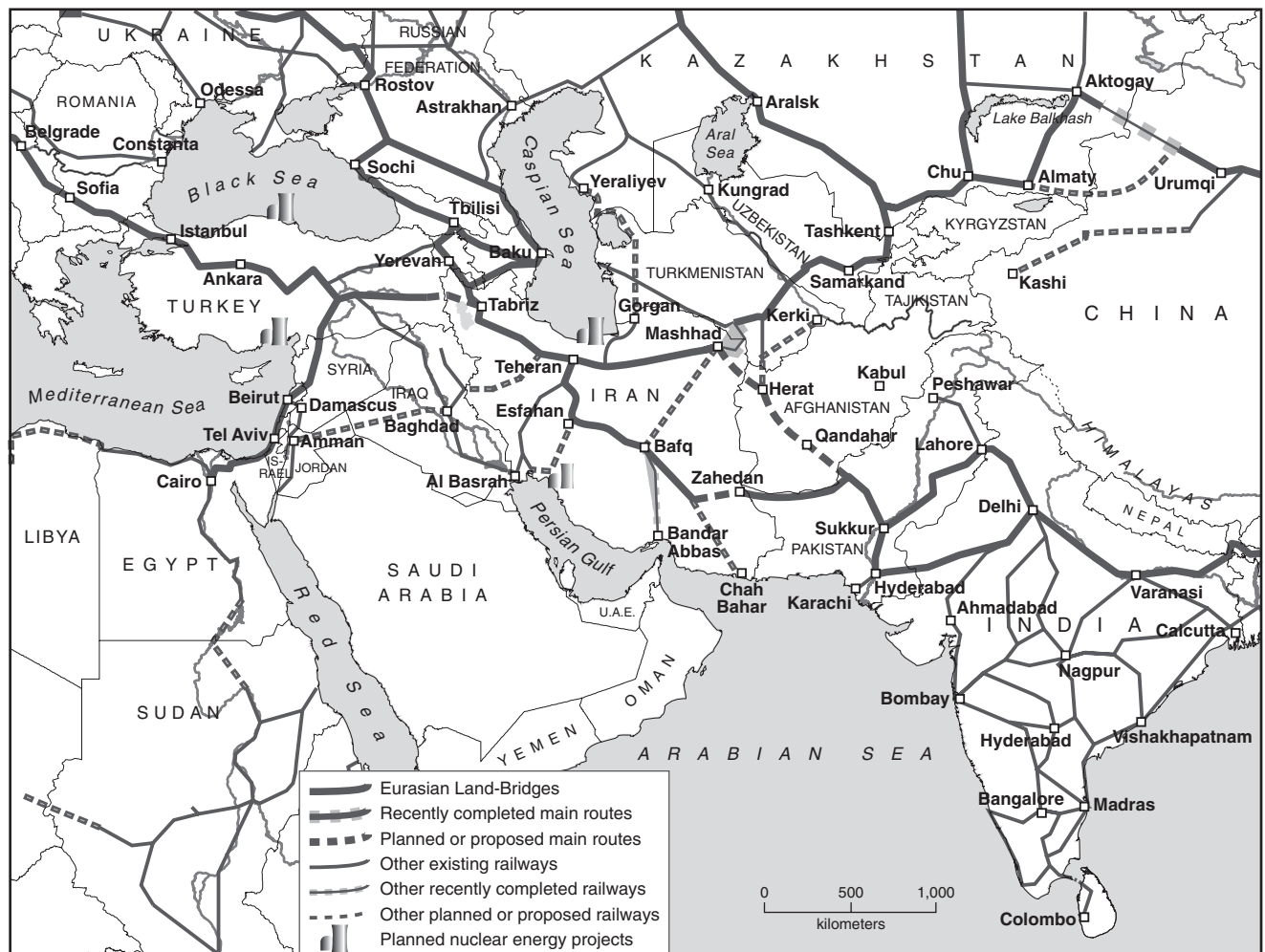
FIGURE 1
Turkey’s Main Railways



Iran’s Rail Electrification a Top Priority

As Turkey has moved, so has Iran. On March 4, the Iranian government announced that it had awarded a contract for the electrification of the railroad from Tehran to Mashhad (in Iran’s northeast, see **Figure 2**), a total dis-

FIGURE 2

Southwest Asia: Rail Routes and Nuclear Energy Projects

EIRNS, 1997

tance of 741 km (461 miles). Mashhad is a key link in the Eurasian Land-Bridge from Lianyungang, China, to Rotterdam. The contract calls for the electrification to be completed within 30 months, and also for the purchase of 70 electric locomotives. It was awarded to a consortium of one Turkish three Iranian companies.

Through electrification, the rail system eliminates diesel-electric locomotives and trains, which each year consume tens of billions of gallons of petroleum worldwide. And the electric trains travel much faster than diesel-electric hybrids.

The Iranian government also has plans to electrify rail from Tehran south to Esfahan (in the center of the country), and to re-electrify rail from Tabriz (in the northwest corner of Iran) down toward Tehran.

Turkey and Iran are anchoring the electrification of

rail in Southwest Asia: The Iranian Transport Minister was a guest of the Turkish government at the commercial launch of the electrified Ankara-to-Eskisehir route on March 13. And the Iranian government included a Turkish company, Baran, in the consortium to electrify the Tehran-Mashhad route.

Economic collaboration like this would underpin durable diplomatic solutions.

In contrast, the United States has less than 2,000 miles of electrified rail in operation, a point President Barack Obama should consider when he visits Turkey on April 6. Lyndon LaRouche has expressed support for a proposal to electrify 46,000 miles of the most heavily trafficked rail route miles in America (see *EIR*, Feb. 27, 2009), an important step in infrastructure-building in the United States.