



China, Russia and Iran Seek to Revive Syrian Railways

OE Watch Commentary: In late November, the Syrian Ministry of Transport announced a major plan to repair, update and expand Syria's railway system. As detailed in the accompanying excerpt from the Syrian government daily *al-Thawra*, the plan includes completing an earlier project to connect Deir ez-Zor and Albu Kamal, along the border with Iraq's al-Anbar Province. It also calls for a new line across the Syrian desert, connecting Homs to Deir ez-Zor. Along with helping jump-start the domestic economy, an effective rail network would allow Syria to leverage its strategic location, at the crossroads of historical east-west and north-south trade routes.

The accompanying passage from the Syrian opposition news source *Enab Baladi* highlights the importance of Chinese investment to Syrian reconstruction efforts in general and the railway sector in particular. It cites a Syrian researcher who hints at extensive Chinese involvement in the future ownership of the Syrian rail system, something that, combined with a 2017 agreement allowing China to use the Lattakia Port, means that China will "own the country." Russia is also involved in revamping the Syrian rail network, and the article notes that Russia's UralVagonZavod will be providing new railway cars to Syria starting next year.

Syria's planned railroad extension along the Euphrates from Deir ez-Zor to the Iraqi border dates from before the war. In the present context it is packaged as part of an Iranian project aimed at linking its own railway system with Syria's Mediterranean ports via Iraq. The first link to connect the countries comes from a short track extension to connect the Iraqi city of Basra to the Iranian city of Khorramshahr across the border. The Basra-Khorramshahr link, in conjunction with a separate idea to connect Basra and Kuwait via rail, has according to the accompanying excerpt from *al-Jazeera* elicited popular opposition inside Iraq, based on fears that it will "eliminate Iraqi ports from competition."

Looming over these various regional initiatives is the Chinese plan to develop a "new silk road" to Europe. Indeed the Iran-Syria connection, according to the Syrian Ministry of Transport, "is a part of a project linked with the Central Asian networks, which in turn are connected to the Chinese and Russian railways." **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

"...China's ownership of railways lines, in addition to its signing of a 2017 agreement with Syria to use the Lattakia Port and maritime transport means that China will own the country..."



Syria Transportation Map (2007).

Source: CIA, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/cia-maps-publications/map-downloads/Syria_Transportation.jpg/image.jpg, Public Domain.

Source:

النقل: خطة استراتيجية لإنشاء 2000 كم من السكك الحديدية
Sahar Awidha. "Transport Ministry: Strategic plan to build 2000 kilometers of railway," *al-Thawra*, 26 November 2018. http://thawra.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=29403321620181126000718

The Ministry of Transport prepared a strategic plan for the National Railroad... The source noted that the plan includes 2,000 kilometers of new railway to reach the entirety of Syrian territory and link all vital sites - seaports, airports, mines, oil refineries, industrial zones, economic, trade and tourist activities, while also developing all existing railways extending 2,450 kilometers... The source pointed to the importance and uniqueness of Syria's geographical position, which highlights the importance of developing the railways to serve domestic and international transport along international routes... The second international transport route is east-west, from Europe to Syria via Syrian ports, and from there to Iraq, Iran and the countries of east Asia...

(continued)



Continued: China, Russia and Iran Seek to Revive Syrian Railways

Source:

Osama al-Abboud. "Syria... Future railway axis in the Middle East," *Enab Baladi*, 2 December 2018. <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/267033>

سوريا.. محور مستقبلي لسكك الحديد في الشرق الأوسط

Despite distancing itself from supporting the Assad regime compared to the support provided by Russia and Iran, China is considered the biggest economic winner in having the regime maintain power in Syria, given the volume of investment China will make in reconstruction.

Baha al-Darubi, the director of projects at the "Saudi Real Estate" company and formerly a lecturer in economics at the "Baath University" in Syria, pointed to China's role in Syrian railways. He noted that Chinese participation in reconstruction is the only option, as Russia does not have the economic power to finance reconstruction, and China is considered a better choice by the Russians than the International Monetary Fund, the United States, or Europe, who reject participating in reconstruction before a political transition in Syria...

[al-Darubi] believes that "China's ownership of railways lines, in addition to its signing of a 2017 agreement with Syria to use the Lattakia Port and maritime transport means that China will own the country."

Russia will in turn sell railway cars in Syria, according to the Sputnik news agency based on a source from UralVagonZavod, the Russian railway car manufacturing company, published last August. The company will be able to deliver the railway cars in 2019.

Last July, Iran signed an agreement to build a railway linking Iran and Syria, during a meeting between a delegation from the Iranian Ministry of Roads and City Building with the Syrian regime government.

The agreement signed traces the railway from the Iranian city of Shiraz toward the Iraqi city of Basra, through Albu Kamal and Deir Ezzor all the way to the port of Lattakia, on the Mediterranean coast. The Iranian railway portion is considered the least costly, as it will rely on existing railway lines in Iran and Iraq. It will require the addition of only around 32 kilometers of railway at a cost of \$53,000 USD, according to the Iranian Railway Company. The Syrian side will handle the route leading to the port of Lattakia.

Source:

Ammar Saleh. "How will Iraqi ports be affected by the railway link with Iran and Kuwait?" *aljazeera.net*, 21 November 2018. <https://goo.gl/7WRHS4>

كيف ستتأثر موانئ العراق من ربط السكك الحديدية بإيران والكويت؟

A wave of anger and criticism pervades the Iraqi street following statements by President Barham Salih, in which he called on Kuwait and Iran to carry out projects to link their railways to Basra. According to specialists, these projects threaten to "eliminate Iraqi ports."

The project to link with Iran includes laying rail for 32.5 kilometers, beginning in the city of Basra and ending near the Shalamchek border crossing, for the transport of goods and passengers. Kuwait meanwhile seeks to implement a similar project to Basra, in order to transport goods to Iraq.

With increased popular pressure to cancel this project, Basra's governor Asaad al-Ayadani said in a press statement: "Everything involving the railway link between Iraq and Kuwait is mere talk and is part of Kuwait's 2035 vision."

These statements did not prevent the Iraqi street from continuing its demands that the project be scrapped. Civilian activist Hossein al-Asadi said that he and some of his colleagues seek to organize informational discussions and to go out and protest in order to achieve their goals.

Maritime specialist Riyadh al-Asadi said that "the project to link the railways between Kuwait and Iran will negatively affect activities in Iraqi ports, which are of limited depth (no deeper than 12 meters), while Iran and Kuwait have deepwater ports on the Gulf."

Speaking to aljazeera.net, he explained that as a result of these projects, trade will shift to Kuwaiti and Iranian ports near Basra. In addition, the transporting of Iraqi goods by rail will eliminate Iraqi ports from competition.

Source: Adnan Abu Zee. "Iran moving forward with railway link to Syria via Iraq," *al-Monitor*. 30 November 2018. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/iran-iraq-syria-railway.html>

[The Syrian Transport Ministry] added, "The Syrian part of the project includes building 32 kilometers [20 miles] of railway, while Iraq will build the rest, which will stretch deep into Iraq to connect Baghdad to Karbala [in central Iraq] and Karbala to Syrian territory. This will facilitate the movement of individuals and goods between Iran, Iraq and Syria."

The ministry denied rumors "that the railway will promote the Iranian influence toward the Mediterranean."

"The railway is a part of a project linked with the Central Asian networks, which in turn are connected to the Chinese and Russian railways," the email continued, referring to Syria's role in the new Silk Road (China's Belt and Road Initiative).