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How is the Proposed Ben Gurion Canal Tied to Israel's Gaza Invasion?



The proposed Ben Gurion Canal would create an alternative to the Suez Canal. Its proximity to Gaza has raised questions about whether it is one of the motivations for the Israeli invasion. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

In the past several years, interest has revived in the Ben Gurion Canal, a proposed alternative to the Suez Canal named after Israel's founding father running through Israel close to Gaza. Creating an incentive for removal of Palestinians from Gaza, particularly the north end, it has raised suspicions that Israel had foreknowledge of Hamas' October 7 attacks and let them happen.

It has now been documented that Israel received multiple warnings something was about to occur. *The New York Times* reported that Israeli officials obtained detailed knowledge of attack plans a year before. (Link not paywalled.) Egyptian intelligence made repeated warnings as October 7 approached that a major event was about to take place.

Whether or not these facts offer definitive proof that elements of Israel's government knew something was on the way, the new interest in creating an alternative to one of the world's most important east-west transit points has raised questions. As the accompanying map shows, the Mediterranean end of the canal would run close to the northern boundary of Gaza. Obviously, a situation where shipping was subject to rocket attacks would make that untenable, as Houthi attacks at the southern entrance of the Red Sea have proved.

To obtain the investment capital necessary to build the canal, a secure situation would have to be established. The only options for that would be a peace settlement with the Palestinians, or their removal. An Israeli government dead set against the first option would have to exercise the second.

The concept of building a transoceanic canal through Israel dates to 1963, when the U.S. Lawrence Livermore Laboratory developed a scenario that would have used nuclear explosions to dig the canal. The classified document was not made public until 1993. That was part of a particular insanity of the time when both the U.S. and Soviet Union considered using nukes in massive excavation projects. The U.S. version was Operation Plowshare.

The idea for a new canal had been spurred by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, taking it over from British and French interests. That resulted in a war involving both those countries and Israel against Egypt. Intervention by U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower forced them to concede, but the canal was blocked to Israeli traffic for a year.

The Ben Gurion Canal concept went into abeyance for decades due to concern about radioactive releases and Arab opposition. But new prospects for cooperation between Arab nations and Israel emerged with the Abraham Accords under the Trump Administration, which saw the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries including the United Arab Emirates. Almost immediately after normalization in 2020, a deal was made to ship UAE oil via a pipeline from Eliat on an arm of the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, but it was later blocked by Israeli environmental authorities based on concerns about oil spills.

At the September 2023 G20 meeting shortly before the Hamas attack, the India-Middle East Corridor was announced. It would create a transportation link from India to Europe across the Arabian Peninsula via Dubai in the UAE to the Israeli port of Haifa. In December 2023, even after Israel launched its invasion of Gaza, UAE and Israeli interests made a deal to create a land bridge between Dubai and Haifa.

Suez blockage leads to announcement

With the Abraham Accords in the background, an event in 2021 brought new attention to the Ben Gurion Canal, this time excavated by more conventional means. In March of that year, a massive container ship suffered a steering malfunction and grounded in the Suez Canal, shutting off traffic. The *Ever Given* blockage raised concerns about how this vital artery of global shipping could become a choke point. (See: Suez Crisis Highlights Fragility of Globalization.)

In April Israel announced it would begin construction of a dual-channel canal that could handle 2-way traffic in June. At 50 meters deep, 10 more than the Suez, and 200 wide, it would be capable of accommodating the world's biggest ships, an advantage over the more limited Suez Canal. Unlike Suez with its sandy shores, rock walls would reduce maintenance requirements to a minimum. Its 181 miles in length would exceed Suez by about one-third. Around 300,000 workers would be needed to complete the project, with a wide range of estimated costs from \$16 billion to \$55 billion. Israel would expect to earn around \$6 billion annually in transit fees, deeply cutting in Egypt's revenues, which reached a record \$9.4 billion in fiscal year 2022-23.

Despite the announcement, construction did not start. "Many analysts interpret the current Israeli re-occupation of the Gaza Strip as something that many Israeli politicians have been waiting for in order to revive an old project," the *Eurasia Review* reports. "Although it was not the original idea, according to the wishes of some Israeli politicians, the last part of the canal could be in Gaza. If Gaza were to be razed to the ground and the Palestinians displaced, a scenario that is happening this fall, it would help planners cut costs and shorten the route of the canal by diverting it into the Gaza Strip."

The new focus on the Ben Gurion Canal coincides with a revival of interest in another Gaza-related project, the exploitation of gas reserves off the Gaza Coast. This was detailed in a recent post. The Gaza Marine field was first discovered in 1999, but proposals to tap it were blocked for many years by Israel. Then in March 2021 the Palestinian Investment Fund, a branch of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the Egyptian government signed a

memorandum of understanding aimed at developing the field. But Hamas representatives raised objections.

On June 18 2023, a little under 4 months before the attack, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced plans to move forward on development in conjunction with the PA and Egypt. It had been reported that secret talks on development took place between Israel and the PA the prior month.

The PA is widely seen as complicit in Israeli occupation of the West Bank, and is a political rival to Hamas. Striking a deal to exploit Gaza Marine would further buy off the PA and strengthen it vis-à-vis Hamas. As with the revival of the canal proposal, this has also stirred suspicions that Israeli authorities deliberately ignored warnings about the October 7 Hamas attack. For development would entail getting Hamas out of the way in Gaza. Hamas would not agree to drilling unless it received a share of the earnings, something unacceptable to Israel.

Providing Israel with global shipping leverage

The Ben Gurion Canal would provide Israel with leverage over one of the world's most important shipping points. Around 22,000 ships transited the Suez Canal in 2022, representing 12% of world trade. It is a crucial artery for shipments of manufactured goods, grain and fossil fuels. The International Energy Agency reports, "About 5% of the world's crude oil, 10% of oil products and 8% of LNG seaborne flows transit the canal." Though the flow from east to west is still important, increasingly fossil products move from the Atlantic basin to feed Asia's growing economies.

Suez was closed to Israel from 1948-50 during and immediately after the first Arab-Israeli War and then again in 1956-57 as an outcome of the second conflict. After the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula up to the canal, it was closed to all traffic until a 1975 settlement when Israel pulled back. Since the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, traffic has remained unrestricted.

But the 2021 closure raised concerns by the U.S. military, for which Suez remains a vital transit point. As well, the increasing alignment of Egypt with Russia and China through its new membership in BRICS and participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative gives pause to the U.S. national security establishment. All this would provide motivation to Israel's closest ally to see an alternative waterway created.

Did revived interest in the Ben Gurion Canal cause Israeli authorities to look the other way when they had clear warnings of a Hamas attack? When analyzing the forensics of a case, one looks at means, motive and opportunity. Between the new focus on the canal as well

as offshore gas reserves that both date to around 2021, Israel clearly had motives to clear Gaza, or a large part of it, of its Palestinian population, even beyond the drive-by rightist elements to create an exclusive Jewish state throughout historic Palestine. With its military power, it had the means. The Hamas attacks of October 7 gave it the opportunity.

The actions since fortify the case. With the vast destruction of Gaza beyond any rational necessity to fight Hamas, making the strip virtually uninhabitable, it is hard to argue the goal isn't expulsion of the population. Taken in the context of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ordering a plan to "thin" Gaza's population "to a minimum," as reported in Israeli media, and Finance Minister Bezael Smotrich's calls to depopulate Gaza, the intent seems clear. Underscoring the point was Netanyahu's display of a map of "the new Middle East" that erased Palestine and showed an Israel "from the river to the sea" when he addressed the U.N. two weeks before October 7.

It is unlikely we will ever know for sure. But the prospect of occupying a key point in global shipping, with all the leverage and money that comes with that, provides at least reasonable grounds for suspicion that Israeli officials indeed had foreknowledge of October 7 and allowed the attacks to happen. It would only be one factor playing into a general desire for an ethnically cleansed region "from the river to the sea," but a powerful factor nonetheless.

Donate to UNRWA

The United States and other countries have opted to defund the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on the grounds that 12 named and one unnamed employee of its 13,000 participated in the October 7 attacks. The 12 were immediately fired. But, as *[Responsible Statecraft](#)* reported, ". . . while the Israelis make a number of claims and accusations that they say are based on intelligence and other source data, the document itself contains no direct evidence that these 12 identified UNRWA employees participated in or assisted the Oct. 7 attack."

The Israeli report came immediately after another U.N. arm, the International Court of Justice, ruled there is a case that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, and ordered it to take measures to prevent it. The report and subsequent funding are widely seen as a way to divert attention from the ruling and discredit the U.N. in general.

Defunding the UNRWA undermines the prime agency bringing humanitarian aid into Gaza and intensifies the now widespread starvation of the population. But just because the U.S. and other nations have cut off funding doesn't mean you have to. You can make a [direct donation to UNRWA here](#). Please do.

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