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# Laying down the tracks: China helps build MENAT railways



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Governments across the region are tapping into China's expertise in developing and maintaining their fast-expanding railway infrastructure.

China recently brought in a big piece of its technology to Saudi Arabia – more like 453 kilometres (km) of it: the Haramain High Speed Rail Project, which was built by a consortium that included the China Railway Construction Corporation.

With speeds of 300 km an hour, the Jeddah-Mecca-Medina railway line is the fastest in the region and is seen as a new model of infrastructure vital for cutting travelling times. It will also bring efficiency and help the kingdom boost the number of pilgrims it can accommodate in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, in addition to the King Abdullah Economic City and the King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah.

## High-speed Rail Expert

Saudi Arabia's decision to entrust the vital project to the Chinese was due to their rapid strides in building the country's rail capacity over the past decade.

[China's Medium and Long Term Railway Network Plan<sup>1</sup>](#), which was first carried out by Beijing to develop the country's railway infrastructure system in 2008, estimates that by 2020, the total mileage of China's over 250-km-per-hour railway lines (high-speed rail lines) will reach 30,000 km and link all provincial capital cities and metropolises with a population of over 500,000.

By 2015, China had an operating rail network of 121,000 km, of which 19,000 km were high-speed rail.

According to the new plan, China's railway network by 2020 will be 150,000 km, of which about 30,000 km will be high speed.

Indeed, the launch of Beijing-Tianjin Intercity Railway, Wuhan-Guangzhou high-speed railway and Beijing-Shanghai high-speed railway, which began operations in 2008, 2009 and 2011, respectively, underscored Chinese expertise in rail infrastructure.

"The opening of these lines was a powerful demonstration of China's ability of building, operating and maintaining the entire high-speed rail line, and this capability was maturing ceaselessly," according to a research note by the School of Economics at Renmin

University of [China<sup>2</sup>](#).

With such a pedigree and expertise in building railways infrastructure, many Middle East countries are tapping Chinese expertise to roll out their own rail lines in major cities and connecting business and commercial hubs.

## Connecting The Middle East

Rising population, growing economies, as well as an urgent need to connect congested cities and expand the non-oil economy are all driving railway infrastructure growth in the wider region.

As much as US\$ 240 billion worth of projects are planned in the Gulf states alone, according to [Ventures<sup>3</sup> Onsite](#), with US\$ 69 billion worth of projects currently under construction, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

However, the US\$ 16 billion Haramain high-speed rail was not the first Chinese project in Saudi Arabia, as the China Railways Construction Corp. had already been involved in developing the Mecca Metro Pink Line light rail project, which alleviated traffic pressure during the pilgrimage season each year.

The 18.25 km railway in Mecca started operations in 2011, featuring the three main hajj areas of Mina, Muzdalifah and Arafat. It has nine stations and a depot, with a contract cost of about US\$ 1.773 billion.

The project was awarded to China Railway Construction as an engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) contract and was the first time that Chinese enterprises adopted the "design, procurement, and operation maintenance" mode of construction of railway projects.

China is also leading railway development across other Middle Eastern countries. In 2017, Egypt signed a US\$ 1.24 billion light rail deal with China's AVIC International and [China Railway Group<sup>4</sup>](#).

Under the agreement signed with Egypt's National Authority for Tunnels (NAT), China's AVIC international and China Railway Group will build a 66-km network with 11 stations, on which trains will run at speed of up

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to 120 km per hour to Cairo's surrounding districts.

The [China Railway Construction](#)<sup>5</sup> and the China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation also won a bid in 2005 to build the Ankara-Istanbul railway line in collaboration with its Turkish partners. The first phase of connecting Polatli with Esksehir was completed in 2009, while the Ankara-to-Sincan part of the link was completed earlier in 2018.

Aside from the Middle East, China is also involved in a number of projects in Iran, Pakistan, Europe, Central Asia and Africa, as part of its overarching Belt and Road Initiative.

Together, the wider region – spanning three continents – is slowly emerging as an interconnected area, linking people and places, and bringing in new business opportunities.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1 [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2016-07/01/content\\_25925793.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2016-07/01/content_25925793.htm)

2 [http://ebha.org/public/C7:paper\\_file:79](http://ebha.org/public/C7:paper_file:79)

3 <https://www.venturesonsite.com/news/us642-billion-in-rail-way-investments-set-out-in-the-middle-east-north-africa-central-asia-and-south-asia/>

4 <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-egypt-railway-idUSL4N1L23JR>

5 [http://english.crcc.cn/art/2018/8/20/art\\_21578\\_2563553.html](http://english.crcc.cn/art/2018/8/20/art_21578_2563553.html)

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