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## ISLAM IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

OLGA BIBIKOVA. TURKEY IS BUILDING A NEW CANAL  
TO THE BLACK SEA: POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES.

*Keywords: canal, Erdogan,  
Bosphorus, Dardanelles, Russian Navy.*

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*Abstract: The Turkish President is building a canal parallel to the Bosphorus Canal. This canal will provide financial benefits to Turkey, but will create difficulties for other countries, including Russia.*

“This is my dream,” so Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called the Istanbul project, speaking on January 16, 2020. We are talking about a canal that he wants to build parallel to the Bosphorus Strait.

In fact, the idea of creating an artificial transport canal originated in the 16 century, during the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566). Then it was about a canal that was supposed to connect the Izmit Bay, a narrow and long tectonic fault on the Anatolian coast, with Lake Sapanka and the Sakarya

River. It is characteristic that this project has been considered by 7 different sultans for 400 years. Naturally, in those days there was no need to build a canal for the passage of multi-tonnage vessels. It was about the transportation of wood, the main building material, both for buildings and ships. It was supposed to deliver wood in this way not only to Istanbul, but also to Trabzon and Thessaloniki. With such a canal, the cost of transporting wood would be lower, and as a result, more ships and buildings would be built.

Many articles have been written about this project, the authors saw in its implementation a way out of the chronic backwardness in which Turkey was at that time. In particular, the Turkish historian Omer Faruk Yilmaz (1898–1969),<sup>1</sup> argued that the Turkish elites considered the absence of such a canal a serious competitive disadvantage in relation to Europe, where canals were commonplace already in the 19th century.

In 1994, the leader of the Democratic Left Party and former Prime Minister of Turkey Mustafa Bulent Ejevit (1925–2006) returned to the idea of building a canal (already in the European part of Turkey). The main task of the new canal, Ejevit indicated as d unloading the Bosphorus. He also came up with a name for it – “Istanbul”. However, the project was never implemented.

On April 26, 2011, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in his speech that “the dream will come true.” However, unlike the unrealized project, the new project is supposed to be implemented in the European part of Turkey, and not for the supply of wood, but for the passage of ships.

According to the “Montreux Convention on the Regime of the Turkish Straits”<sup>2</sup> (signed on November 9, 1936), all vessels have the right to move freely through the Bosphorus Strait without having to resort to the paid services of a pilot.<sup>3</sup> According to the convention, Turkey has no right to close the passage for ordinary vessels, and the passage of military vessels is strictly regulated. The Black Sea countries have priority.<sup>4</sup>

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The foreign public compared the project of the new Istanbul canal with the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, but soon the Turkish press wrote about it as a large-scale project that should not only unload the canal through the Bosphorus, but also ensure the socio-economic development of the entire Marmara Bölgesi - Marmara region, which includes 18 provinces.

The implementation of the project is consistent with the initial hopes of the authorities for a significant increase in the country's economic growth and ensuring Turkey's strategic position in the international arena. This project was included in the 11th five-year plan adopted for the period from 2019 to 2023, and included grandiose projects dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Turkey.<sup>5</sup> The route of the canal was approved in January 2018, according to it the new canal will pass to the west of Istanbul through the districts of Küçükçekmece, Sazlıdere and Durusu, it will be able to pass about 160 vessels per day, including tankers weighing up to 300 thousand tons.

Erdogan explained the need for the construction of a new shipping canal by economic reasons. According to the calculations of Turkish experts, by 2050 approximately 78 thousand ships a year will pass through the Bosphorus, while 25 thousand ships are guaranteed safe passage. "We look at the new project as a project to save the future of Istanbul. We have conducted all the necessary studies, including probing and environmental impact assessment,"<sup>6</sup> Erdogan said.

In addition, the Turks are thinking about expanding the recreational area. Turkey has an extensive coastline of four seas (Black, Marmara, Aegean and Mediterranean), warm and suitable for recreation. The total length of the coastline of Turkey is 8333 km, of which 1067 km falls on the coastline of the islands belonging to Turkey. Tourism makes a significant contribution to the overall budget. According to official data, the share of tourism revenues in 2019 (for the period from January to September) reached \$26.63 billion.<sup>7</sup> In 2021, the Turkish

authorities have set a goal to receive at least \$35 billion net profit from the tourism industry.<sup>8</sup> However, the pandemic has made its own adjustments. In the future, if it is possible to create new resorts on the coast of the Black, and the other seas, then it will bring additional income to the country.

The construction of the canal is estimated to cost Turkey \$15 billion, part of the amount is likely to be attracted from abroad. For example, from Qatar. It is known that Erdogan has repeatedly visited Doha, where he probably concluded agreements for multibillion-dollar investments. It is believed that the canal will pay off in 15 years: the expected revenue is \$1 billion per year.<sup>9</sup>

The designers believe that the canal will allow the transit of 300,000 DWT<sup>10</sup> vessels, which are on average 10 per cent wider than the maximum allowable width in other canals, such as, for example, the Suez Canal.

Moreover, it is assumed that the soil that will be dug during the implementation of the project will be used for the construction of a new airport designed for 60 million passengers per year. This will be the third airport in the European part of Turkey. The second Istanbul Airport, opened on 29.10.2018, has already established itself as one of the largest in the world in terms of capacity (200 million passengers per year).<sup>11</sup> The new airport is designed for 60 million passengers per year.<sup>12</sup>

The advantage of an artificial transport corridor will be the absence of sharp turns. The sharpest turn of the Bosphorus is 90°. Given the strong currents and heavy traffic in the strait, this seriously increases the risk of accidents.<sup>13</sup> However, the construction of the Istanbul Canal (parallel to the Bosphorus Strait) will be only the first stage. The second will be the duplication of the Dardanelles.

Usually canals are built in order to reduce the transit time on the way. The Suez Canal saves on average from 16 to 34 days of sailing, the Panama Canal saves from 5 to 14 days of travel. In the case of the projected Istanbul Canal, there will be no time

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savings: the duration of the voyage to the Black Sea from the Sea of Marmara will remain the same. However, the waiting time for passage through the canal will be significantly reduced. The average cost of downtime per day is 20 thousand dollars per day.

The congestion of the Bosphorus Canal is well known: due to the constant traffic that has arisen in the Bosphorus – Dardanelles Strait, ships sometimes have to wait from 15 to 72 hours. Of the 50 thousand ships passing through the canal annually, 10 thousand are oil tankers from 150 to 500 thousand tons, the most fire-hazard objects.

Ship collisions and fires have repeatedly occurred in the Straits, and had serious consequences. In 1960, the Yugoslav tanker *Zoranich* collided with the Greek vessel *World Harmony*. 12 tons of gasoline and 10 thousand tons of oil got into the water. The fire spread to the Istinie district (the north-western part of the European coast of the Bosphorus), which almost completely burned out. The burning vessel drifted to the Beykoz district, in the Asian part of the city, and as the result of that a number of people perished. The tanker burned for 52 days. To extinguish it a special vessel for extinguishing fires on the water arrived from the USA. In 1979 the Romanian tanker *Independent* collided with the Greek cargo ship *Evriali* at the entrance to the Bosphorus near the Haidarpasha station on the Asian coast. As a result of the accident, 95 thousand tons of oil fell into the waters of the Bosphorus, 43 deaths were recorded.<sup>14</sup> For half a century, 430 major accidents have occurred in the waters of the Strait. 27 large vessels are resting at the bottom of the Bosphorus.<sup>15</sup>

The Istanbul Canal project is extremely complex, not only because of its goals, but also because of the choice of its location, the serious socio-economic impact it will have on the region. Critics claim that the new canal may cause environmental damage to the territory through which it should pass. According to the mayor of Istanbul, the Social Democrat Ekrem Imamoglu,<sup>16</sup> the real cost of the canal construction cannot be less than \$80 billion. He believes that in the process of implementing the

project, issues may arise with providing the city with fresh water. Fresh water sources in the European part of Istanbul, as well as Lake Terkos, from where water was taken even in ancient times, will be under the threat of salinization. To compensate for the losses, it will be necessary to supply the city with water from Asia, and this will be more expensive, and the quality of river water there is lower.

The mayor of Istanbul called this project "a betrayal of Istanbul."<sup>17</sup> In protest, he terminated the cooperation protocol that the previous municipality had agreed with the Government.

Professor Doganai Tolunai from Istanbul University, believes that the canal threatens the complex ecosystem of the region: "The dune landscapes in the north are home to protected forests, streams and pastures that are important to the ecosystem and are home to hundreds of species of plants and animals."<sup>18</sup> In addition, in his opinion, the canal and residential complexes along its shores will be built in an earthquake-prone zone, etc.

Turkish environmentalists spoke out against the "construction of the century". They claim that as a result, "the delicate balance between the Black and Marmara Seas may be disrupted. The salinity of the Black Sea is lower than that of the Marmara Sea. Water from the Black Sea will begin to flow into the Marmara Sea along with bacteria, which will eventually lead to the shallowing of the Black Sea and pollution of the Marmara Sea."<sup>19</sup> According to oceanographer Cemal Saidam, professor at Hacettepe University in Ankara, "the construction of the canal will entail irreversible consequences for the ecosystems of the Black and Marmara Seas. The complexity of the situation lies in the fact that the level of the Black Sea exceeds the level of the Marmara Sea by about 30–50 cm. The situation is different in the Bosphorus Strait: there are two differently directed currents that do not allow the Black Sea to become shallow, since they feed it with the waters of the "neighbor""<sup>20</sup>

The opinion of Turkish ecologists coincides with the opinion of Russian hydrologists, who remind that "The Black Sea

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was once the same inland body of water as the Caspian. The water in the sea ... is much fresher than in the Marmara Sea, but this is only its upper layer. At a depth of about 200 m, there is practically no oxygen in the water mass, and the sea is a lifeless hydrogen sulfide environment in which there is nothing alive. At the same time, the Black Sea is the largest storage of hydrogen sulfide among all the seas of our planet. And the situation is getting worse. This relatively fresh surface layer of water is getting thinner. If the layer breaks through, hydrogen sulfide will rush into the atmosphere, an ecological catastrophe will arise."<sup>21</sup> In addition, experts warn that the canal may have a negative impact on the tectonic fault lines that lie deep under the territory of Istanbul. The new canal will turn the Istanbul agglomeration into an island and make it less protected from earthquakes. However, Erdogan does not share the views of environmentalists.

Skeptics believe that Erdogan is using the project to distract the Turkish population from his expansionist plans in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, on the Mediterranean shelf, where he came to close quarters with Greece, in the Armenian-Azerbaijani direction, etc. Rumors play an important role, according to which, land plots along the future canal have already been bought up by the president's inner circle, which will enrich itself on the project.<sup>22</sup> The Republican People's Party, Turkey's largest opposition party, criticized the project as being carried out "behind the taxpayer's back."<sup>23</sup> According to polls, up to 80 per cent of the city's residents are against the new canal.<sup>24</sup>

The Turkish president is well known for his penchant for gigantic projects in Istanbul, be it a new airport, tunnels running under the Bosphorus<sup>25</sup> – he built all this in a short time. Let's add here the conversion of Christian churches to the religious needs of Turkish Moslems, etc. In the same context, we can recall the Russian-Turkish Akkuyu nuclear project.<sup>26</sup>

It is obvious that the introduction of a new canal will inevitably lead to the temporary closure of the canal through the

Bosporus, which needs cleaning. A number of studies have noted severe pollution caused by the discharge of waste water from ships, as well as ballast water. In addition, sea transportation is inevitably associated with ecosystem disturbances, especially in cases when the vessel crossed several seas with different fauna and flora. Since the 1990s, the Bosporus has already suffered from the spread of jellyfish, originally living off the coast of North America, which was imported by ships. In the spring of 2021 the surface of the Marmara Sea, covered with slime. This is the so-called "sea saliva", which appeared due to pollution – untreated sewage discharged into the sea. It has a jelly-like texture consisting of a variety of organic components, including dead algae, animal flesh. Experts believe that the cause of its occurrence is waste that people dump into the water, as well as climatic changes. Usually such masses are formed in those areas of water that are warmer than the rest. This mucus seems to be superficial, but its thickness reaches 40 m in places. Naturally, it negatively affects the life of marine flora and fauna. In addition, it is necessary to clean the bottom of the strait from the mixture of petroleum products accumulated there. The spillage of petroleum products is quite common and usually occurs as a result of a collision of ships. So, in December 1999, a Russian-made tanker split in two at the mouth of the strait, a fuel spill led to pollution of six miles of coast.

The new canal will have advantages. The fact is that the Istanbul Canal will be more direct, while passing through the Bosporus, some vessels must maneuver fifteen times during their passage to get from one end of the strait to the other, Two of its fifteen maneuvers – off the coast of Pashabahce and in front of the Yenikei – are considered especially dangerous, since they require 85° and 70° turns.

The cost of passage through the strait depends on the draft of the vessel<sup>27</sup>, tonnage, height of deck cargo, time of filing an application for passage through the strait. In addition, for passage through the strait, ship owners pay a "lighthouse fee" to

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maintain the operation of navigation signs, by which the captains are guided.

In 1994, Turkey introduced additional rules, according to which vessels from 150 to 200 m in length must give the strait administration a 24 hours notice of their passage, vessels from 200 to 300 m with a draft of more than 15 m – a 48 hours notice. The Turkish Maritime Administration must be notified 10 days in advance about the passage of vessels with a length of more than 300 meters<sup>28</sup>. Another new rule has been introduced for ships carrying military cargo,<sup>29</sup> these vessels are now equated to military. The precedent that led to the initiation of such a step was the US attempt to deliver military goods through the Bosphorus by commercial vessels in August 2008 during the armed conflict in South Ossetia.

Naturally, the rules of passage through the Straits, fixed in the Montreux Convention of 1936, will not apply to the new canal. The Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits are a natural passage from one sea to another. As for the Istanbul Canal, we are talking about an artificial water passage, the construction of which was undertaken by Turkey. In this regard, Turkey has the right to charge passage fees from absolutely all vessels, whether civilian or military. However, there is a question about the rights of the Black Sea States. Their rights were fixed in the Montreux Convention, but in the new conditions it is necessary to take into account their opinion regarding the number of vessels, their classification, etc., the number of vessels located simultaneously in the Black Sea.

It is obvious that Ankara will not stop at the construction of a canal parallel to the Bosphorus. There is already a project that will create a Dardanelles Strait stand-in. It will not be so expensive, because its length will be much shorter. As a result of the implementation of the second project, the Galipoli Peninsula (as well as the area around the city of Istanbul) will become an island. Thus, Turkey will create a new, artificial route from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea (with a call to the Marmara).

Given the military-political situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is necessary to calculate the consequences of the construction of this huge project for the Russian Federation, which actively uses the Black Sea Straits, both for commercial and military purposes.

Turkey, being a member of NATO, in the new conditions can conclude a special agreement with its partners on the navigation regime on the Istanbul Canal. It is possible that Ankara hopes to "lock up" the Russian fleet in the Black Sea in this way. The Russian and Iranian presence in Syria prevents Erdogan from carrying out his plans to seize a number of Syrian territories, primarily Idlib, located in northwestern Syria. And although Alexey Yerkhov, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, stated that "The presence or absence of an additional waterway in the form of the Istanbul Canal between the Black and Marmara Seas will not change the international legal regime of the Montreux Convention...,"<sup>30</sup> it is obvious that the implementation of this project will create certain difficulties for the Russian fleet.

According to some experts, the "alternative Bosphorus" project was put forward by Erdogan as a certain element of bargaining with Moscow and as an instrument of influence on processes in the regions of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>31</sup>

In the context of Erdogan's Syrian policy, it is obvious that in this way he wants to minimize the presence of the Russian fleet near the coast of Syria, to prevent the supply of weapons and food to this country, which, according to Erdogan, should contribute to the removal of Bashar al-Assad and replace him with a figure more loyal for Turkey. There are also more distant goals – to declare Turkey as a world power and try to realize Erdogan's main goal – to restore the territory of the Ottoman Empire under his influence.

The fact that Erdogan wants to "bury" the Montreux Convention is evidenced by his early statement. In 2011, when the plan for a new canal was just being discussed, Erdogan said:

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“Traffic on the Bosphorus will be reduced to zero... Water sports will take place on the Bosphorus, transport will be established within the city, Istanbul will return to its former times.”<sup>32</sup> This statement was published by the authoritative magazine *New Civil Engineer* (Great Britain).<sup>33</sup>

The new canal does not fall under the jurisdiction of the Montreux Convention, since the artificial canal is not a strait,<sup>34</sup> so shipowners, as we have already noted, will have to pay for passage, resort to the services of pilots and pay other fees. In the case of both transport routes, the advantageous and free status of the Bosphorus, compared to the expensive Istanbul Canal, is unlikely to encourage transport vessels to use the new waterway.

As noted earlier, vessels passing through the Bosphorus Strait do not have to pay taxes or pay duty. Regarding the future of the canal, the Turkish authorities have already announced that they plan to introduce a payment<sup>35</sup> to finance the maintenance of the Bosphorus, as is done for other canals. It is expected that the canal will pass about 55,000 vessels per year (compared to 41,000 for the Bosphorus in 2019). For comparison, in 2018, a total of about 18,000 ships passed through the Suez Canal.<sup>36</sup>

In April 2021, a loud scandal occurred in Turkey. First, the speaker of the country's parliament, Mustafa Shentop, said that President Erdogan “even tomorrow” could withdraw from the Convention.<sup>37</sup> His statement drew harsh criticism. Then 103 retired admirals of the Turkish Navy wrote an open letter expressing their concern about Turkey's possible withdrawal from the 1936 international agreement. This attack angered the Turkish leadership, and after the Prosecutor General's Office launched an investigation, 14 admirals were arrested.

In their letter, the admirals called the Montreux Convention a diplomatic victory for Turkey, which restored its sovereign rights to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. The authors of the letter stated that the discussion on the revision of this agreement in connection with the Istanbul Canal project was unacceptable. The letter also expressed the opinion on the need to preserve the

current Constitution of Turkey against the background of Turkish leader Tayyip Erdogan's calls for the development of a new basic law of the country, which they consider as a desire to "abandon the precepts of the founder of the republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk."

There is an ambiguous attitude towards Erdogan's project in the Turkish press. Thus, the columnist of the Evrensel newspaper Yusuf Karataş writes that "Erdogan in his statements stressed that the Montreux Convention limits Turkey's sovereignty over the straits, but sovereignty over the Istanbul canal will be completely in the hands of Turkey. In addition, the Turkish leader said that Turkey will remain committed to the Montreux Convention until it finds a better opportunity." According to the author, "Erdogan considers the Istanbul Canal as a project that will invalidate the Montreux Convention and open the doors to a new bargaining around the straits." <sup>39</sup> Turkish journalist Taha Akyol in his article "What did the Montreux Convention give?" writes: "it is dangerous to open a canal whose rules of use are not established by international documents, and thereby neutralize the operation of the Montreux Convention." <sup>40</sup>

There is no doubt that with the commissioning of the Istanbul Canal, Ankara will receive new levers of pressure on its Black Sea neighbors. Experts tend to see in what is happening the desire of President Recep Erdogan to strengthen Turkey's influence in the region. Indeed, Turkey can become the main moderator of traffic in the Black Sea-Eastern Mediterranean basin. Such a situation risks adding additional difficulties to the already complicated configuration of the Syrian conflict.

Obviously, a new international discussion will be needed on the legal status of ships in the Black Sea, the use of the Bosphorus Strait, as well as new canals. Imagine the situation: according to the Montreux Convention, military vessels cannot stay in the Black Sea for more than three weeks, and their total tonnage should not exceed 45 thousand tons. But this provision is

mandatory for ships that have passed the Bosphorus. And if other vessels passed through the Istanbul Canal at the same time? Erdogan is quite capable of resorting to manipulations, because the status of the new canal has not yet been indicated in any way.

In addition, the situation in the Black Sea may change after the ships of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Iran enter its waters through the Eurasia Canal, most of which will pass through the natural Kumo-Manych depression.<sup>41</sup> The construction of the canal was initiated by Russia, although the idea of such a canal appeared several centuries ago. Kazakhstan, which thus can gain access to the world ocean, is primarily interested in this canal. The Eurasia Canal will give a good impetus to the development of the EAEU, will promote closer cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan. At the same time, the canal is also beneficial to India, which will be able to send its goods to Europe. One of the investors of the project is China, which implements the One Belt, One Road strategy. Some analysts believe that the Eurasia Canal will work to reorient the European economy from the United States to China. In Turkey, this canal is seen as an opportunity to develop closer ties with the Turkic states of Central Asia.

In conclusion, it should be recognized that Russia, despite the danger of locking its navy in the Black Sea, has the means to prevent such actions by offering the opportunity to use the Eurasia Canal.

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3. However, pilot services are provided.

4. After notifying the Turkish authorities, the Black Sea States can conduct their warships of any class through the straits in peacetime. Significant restrictions have been introduced for ships of non-Black Sea powers. The total tonnage of military vessels of non-Black Sea states in the Black Sea should not exceed 30 thousand tons with a stay of no more than 21 days. If Turkey considers that a military threat has arisen for it, it has the right to prohibit the passage of any military vessels through the straits.
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