Suez Canal and its Alternative

Why in news?

Israel has come up with plans to create an alternative to the Suez Canal.

To know about Israel-Palestine conflict click here

What was the historical background of Suez Canal?

- **Location-** The Suez Canal is a *man-made* canal that connects the ***Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea***, providing a crucial shortcut for shipping between Europe and Asia.
- It cuts north-south across the *Isthmus of Suez* in Egypt.
- **Year of construction** - Construction of the canal began in 1859 and it took around 10 years to complete the project.
- **Management**- The canal is owned and maintained by the *Suez Canal Authority* (SCA), which is under the government of ***Egypt.***

- **Convention of Constantinople-** Signed in 1888 by the maritime powers, it stated that the canal should be *open to ships of all nations* in times of both peace and war.
- Acts of hostility in the waters of the canal and the construction of fortifications on its banks were forbidden by the convention.
- The British and French owned most of the shares in the canal company and used their influence to protect their interests.
- **Suez Crisis -** In 1956, *Egypt took over the Suez Canal* from the British and French shareholders to fund a dam project on the *Nile River.*
- This nationalisation triggered a military attack by UK, France and Israel on Egypt, marking the 1st deployment of the UN Peacekeeping Forces anywhere in the world.
- They were stationed in *Sinai* to maintain peace between Egypt and Israel after the withdrawal of the invading forces.
- **Egypt-Israel conflict**- In 1967, Egypt expelled UN peacekeepers from Sinai and fought with Israel.
- Israel captured Sinai and Egypt blocked the Suez Canal for 8 years.
- In 1975, Egypt and Israel signed an agreement to end the hostilities and reopen the canal.
- **Arab-Israeli War** - The canal was also a key battleground in the *1973 Arab-Israeli War*, where Egypt and Syria attacked Israel.

Established in 2015, Suez Canal Economic Zone is a special economic zone located in Egypt to promote economic growth and to attract foreign investment to the country.

What is the significance of Suez Canal?

- **Global trade**- The canal is a vital link between the West and East, carrying 10% of the global trade every year.
    - An estimated 12% of world maritime trade passes through the Suez Canal.
- **Time efficient**- The canal ensured that ships travelling between Europe and Asia would not have to travel all the way around the continent of Africa.
    - The canal cut the distance between London and Mumbai by a more than 41%.
- **Economy lifeline**- As per World Bank, the canal accounts for nearly 2% of Egypt's GDP.
- **Traffic management**- The canal handles an average of 50 ships per day, with a total value of 9.5 billion dollars.

What are the issues with Suez Canal?

- **Shipping bottleneck**- Despite being widened and deepened over the years, the canal remains perennially congested, with long queues at either end.
- **Suez Canal blockage-** In 2021, the cargo ship "Ever Given" got stuck in the canal thereby affecting the global supply chain and oil prices.
    - It was estimated that the resulting "traffic jam" held up an estimated 9.6 billion dollars of goods every day.
- **Monopoly-** Egypt's control over the waterway has been a source of conflict for almost 70 years now.

What was the alternative proposed to Suez Canal?

Ben Gurion Canal Project	
• Ben Gurion Canal Project is a proposal to create a canal through the *Negev Desert in Israel*, connecting the *Gulf of Aqaba and the Eastern Mediterranean.* • Named after the Israel's founding father David Ben-Gurion, it was 1st envisioned in 1960s to create an alternative route to the Suez Canal.	
Significance	**Challenges**
• **Navigation-** The route is easier for transportation which are unable to transit the Suez Canal due to restrictions on the ship size. • **Efficient-** It would provide alternative to sailing around Africa's southern tip which is more time consuming and expends more fuel. • **Crisis recovery-** The canal will drastically reduce the possibility of a crisis in world trade during instances like Suez Canal blockage. • **Regional development**- The canal would be a strategically valuable alternative to the Suez Canal and would contribute greatly to the economic development of the region.	• **High cost-** The estimated cost of project is as high as 100 billion dollars. • **Security issues-** The plan to use nuclear explosives to dig the canal through the Negev Desert makes this extremely risky. • **Military threat-** The canal which will potentially transport billions of dollars' worth of freight daily cannot run in land under constant military threat, from Hamas rockets or Israeli attacks. • **Logistical constraints-** The Canal would have to overcome the challenges of the terrain and topography, such as the Dead Sea basin, which is below sea level, and the Negev Mountain Range, which would require a lot of excavation.

References

1. Indian Express- A plan to join Red Sea with Mediterranean Sea
2. Indian Express- History of Suez Canal

