

A Revolution on Iron Rails: The Gulf Railway from the 2009 Dream to the 2030 Race



In the Arab world, railways are usually associated with the image of a train connecting two cities along a single line. But the Gulf Railway project breaks with that traditional image: it is more like a cross-border network linking ports, industrial zones, and Gulf capitals along one route.

The project was approved officially at the GCC summit in 2009, then regained stronger momentum after the establishment of the GCC Railways Authority in 2021 and the setting of December 2030 as the target date for full operation.

Today, the Gulf Railway is back in focus after the authority announced that around 50% of the project has been completed. But that figure needs unpacking: does it refer to how much of the rail routes inside each country has been finished? Or does it include the cross-border links that would make the line a single network?

In this report, we map the project in detail to clarify what has actually been completed and what remains in the design, financing, or cross-border connection stages.

The train in numbers: the project map and the scale of progress

The Gulf Railway project aims to build a regional network linking six countries: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and the Sultanate of Oman.

As the following map shows, the main route extends from Kuwait in the north toward Saudi Arabia, then continues south toward the UAE and on to Oman, with branch links toward Bahrain via the King Hamad Causeway and Qatar via the Abu Samra crossing, in addition to the Hafeet Rail link between the UAE and Oman.

Behind this route, however, the network length figures vary depending on what is being counted. Mohammed Al Shabrami, head of the GCC Railways Authority, said it is about 1,700 kilometers long, while other data from the authority and research studies indicate that the full network reaches 2,117 kilometers.

The discrepancy appears to stem from whether the figure counts only the main route or also includes branch links, bilateral segments, and connections with Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman.

As for cost, it was estimated at around \$15 billion according to earlier figures from GCC economy ministers, but no comprehensive official update has been announced after the rise in material and financing costs.

The announcement that the project has surpassed 50% completion is based on progress made in national networks within some countries, as well as design and construction work completed in parts of the project. But it does not necessarily mean that the cross-border Gulf connection is complete.

The UAE, for example, has completed a national network of about 900 kilometers linking Ghuwaifat to Fujairah and aims to transport 60 million tons of cargo by 2030. Saudi Arabia also has an extensive domestic network and is working on projects to link the Red Sea to the Gulf.

By contrast, some crucial links between countries remain at various stages of design, approvals, or financing before the goal of full operation in December 2030 can be reached.

An economy on track: why does the Gulf Railway matter?

The main driver behind the Gulf Railway project is not merely to provide a means of passenger transport, but to create a logistics network linking ports, industrial cities, and domestic markets.

For that reason, the project cannot be read as a single train, but rather as a dual system: a passenger train that shortens distances between cities, and a freight train that carries containers, raw materials, and industrial goods between ports and production zones.

The following design illustrates the difference between the two functions. The

passenger train is designed for speed and travel between cities and capitals, with equipped stations and limited stops.

As for the freight train, it moves at lower speeds but carries the greater economic weight: containers, industrial products, bulk cargo, and raw materials needed by factories and ports.

This is why the importance of the network lies in connecting ports such as Jebel Ali, Fujairah, Sohar, Dammam, and Kuwait's ports with industrial zones such as KIZAD in Abu Dhabi, the Sohar Freezone, and the Jubail Industrial Complex in Saudi Arabia, making the railway a link between sea, factory, and market.

Projects tied to the network offer a picture of the scale of expected traffic:

The King Hamad Causeway between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain is expected to serve millions of passengers annually and transport hundreds of thousands of containers.

The UAE's Etihad Rail network aims to transport tens of millions of tons of freight by 2030.

As for the Hafeet link between the UAE and Oman, it adds a practical model for cross-border passenger and freight connectivity.

If the network is completed, its impact will not be limited to reducing travel time. It will also extend to reducing dependence on trucks, easing road congestion, cutting emissions, and boosting intra-regional trade. In this sense, the Gulf Railway becomes a shared economic infrastructure, not a separate transport project in each country.

The implementation knots: what is delaying the Gulf network?

Despite the announced progress, the project still faces implementation bottlenecks that must be resolved before reaching the 2030 target, with the most prominent challenge lying in the cross-border links.

While Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have made major strides in building their national networks, the Kuwait-Saudi, Saudi-Bahrain, Saudi-Qatar, and UAE-Oman links are still at varying stages of design, financing, or implementation.

These links require not only laying tracks, but also establishing joint crossings, customs procedures, and control systems that allow trains and goods to move smoothly without delay.

This disparity could lead to a delay in the simultaneous operation of the unified network. On the financing side, the project's initial cost is estimated at around \$15 billion.

Added to that is the need to unify signaling and safety systems, as each country

uses or is developing its own operating standards.

Also, there are plans to adopt advanced control systems such as the European Train Control System in some projects, but applying standards across the entire network requires major investments, technical training, and joint coordination.

Agreement on customs procedures and security controls also represents an obstacle, as passengers and goods will need unified customs clearance so that borders do not become choke points that strip the project of its advantages.

But the absence of a unified fund for financing means each country bears the cost of its own segment, which could delay some links such as the King Hamad Causeway, whose cost is estimated at several billion dollars.

Finally, the network needs rail links to ports and airports, as well as logistics zones along the routes to ensure optimal commercial use, and these secondary projects have not all been completed yet.

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