

13 June 2017

## Position Paper **In the Air and Underground – the Jerusalem Cable Car Project and its potential impact on the Historic Basin**

During a government meeting on Jerusalem Day (28 May 2017), the ministers approved the plan to build a cable car that would transport tourists from West Jerusalem to Silwan\City of David and the Western Wall area. For the first phase of the project, which precedes a building permit, the Ministry of Tourism has allocated around 15 million NIS to promote the cable car plans.<sup>1</sup> The cable car will reinforce the site of the "City of David" in the Village of Silwan as a major tourist attraction and bolster the government policy of bringing millions of tourists a year to the Western Wall and the Old City through Silwan. The cable car is part of a series of new projects that are being heavily promoted in Jerusalem's Historic Basin.

The plan to construct a cable car route, which would link the West Jerusalem neighborhoods of Baka and Abu Tor with the Dung Gate area was reported over two years ago<sup>2</sup>. But it only recently received official approval by the government. In order to facilitate its approval the original plan was changed and no longer includes a stop at the Mount of Olives. According to the current plan, Silwan will be the cable car's last stop. The assumption is that in the future the government will try to realize the original plan and extend the cable car to the Mount of Olives and possibly to other stations in East Jerusalem.

The station at Silwan will most probably be built at the Kedem Compound. The cable car and the tunnel routes, which are continuously under excavation in Silwan under the homes of its Palestinian residents and under the Old City wall, will create a busy entry point for tourists above and underneath the village of Silwan.

### **The Cable Car, the Kedem Center and the Tunnels**

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<sup>1</sup> Government Decision no. 2681, 28 May 2017.

<sup>2</sup> N. Hasson, [Jerusalem Set to Unveil Controversial Plan for Cable Car in Old City](#), Haaretz, 5 March 2015.

The government statement includes the following wording: "The construction of a tourist cable car to the area of ancient Jerusalem." The term 'ancient Jerusalem' refers to the site of the City of David in Silwan. The abovementioned Kedem Center, which has been approved for construction in Silwan will be the final station on the cable car route. The Kedem Center itself, which is being advanced by the Elad Foundation, will be the largest tourist center in the Old City. It is projected to be built atop of an archaeological excavation area measuring 5000 square meters and will rise to seven stories and comprise 15,000 square meters of commercial space and areas dedicated to touristic content. It will house the planned Museum of the Bible and one of the levels will contain an exhibition of the antiquities which will be, no doubt, be curated in line with the ideological outlook of the settlers of the Elad Foundation<sup>3</sup>.

The Kedem Center was approved in the planning committees only following aggressive political intervention by the Director General of the Justice Ministry who demanded a repeat discussion of the plan and cancelled the decision by the National Planning and Building Council's appeal committee<sup>4</sup>.

The government's decision to build the cable car's final station within the Kedem Center also has economic implications – partial or full government funding for the complex. The Kedem Center is slated to link up with other tourist sites and archaeological parks through various routes above and below ground. Presently the archaeological site in that location is linked through a tunnel running under the Old City Wall (#10 on the map) to the Davidson Center (#6 on the map) inside the Old City, and to the City of David visitor's center and the Pool of Siloam located in the south of Silwan.

Much has been written about the underground tunnels running under the houses of the village of Silwan and the Old City. This project which is being led by the Israel Antiquities Authority and initiated by the Elad Foundation with government support is expanding all the time and is designed to include paths along the route of the ancient Roman road which will be at least 8 meters wide, and at least 500 meters long. This major walking route has been inaugurated as the "Pilgrims Route" and will simulate the route of the Jewish pilgrims ascending the Temple Mount from 2000 years ago. In addition, the route will comprise commercial and service spots for tourists to be owned or managed by the Elad Foundation.

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<sup>3</sup> [The government has decided to build the Kedem Compound in Silwan](#), 10 December, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> [Press Release: A hard blow to the mayor's and Elad's initiative to build the Kedem Center](#), 8 June, 2015.

## Consequences and Conclusions

The construction of a cable car has financial implications, as well as political and cultural ramifications and will have consequences for the landscape of the historic basin and transport in the city.

From a transportation perspective the construction of a cable car makes a lot of sense. The challenge of access to historic cities exists in other places in the world. These cities are characterized by a dense network of streets, and transport within them usually involves pollution producing private vehicles and buses, often to the detriment of the monuments. In this sense, a cable car is a transport solution, which has ecological advantages and massive transportation potential.

The potential damage to the landscape of the Old City is not yet clear. We will be able to assess this only once the official plan is presented. However, already there is widespread professional criticism by architects and planners of the Kedem Center, or the plan to construct a building the size of a mall, so close to the Old City walls and almost as high, in what is known as the "green belt" surrounding ancient Jerusalem. Critics have also stated that the cable car would commercialize Jerusalem turning it into a kind of Disneyland and will damage its famous beautiful skyline.

From an economic standpoint, the creation of a new transport route with the capacity to transport approximately 3000 people an hour to and from the Old City is potentially a very lucrative project! The bodies designing the route and the various stations have an enormous economic influence on the institutions operating in the Old City. It looks like the main body to profit will be the Elad Foundation who manage the City of David and the Kedem Project, and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation which manages the Western Wall Tunnels, which will also be a magnet for multitudes of tourists under this plan.

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of tourists via cable cars and tunnels to the Old City will facilitate an unusual form of control over the tourist experience. Tourists will not be travelling within a noisy heterogeneous urban environment but will be ushered into sites which present a "closed" narrative shaped by a national-religious perspective. The tourists will be told that the stories are based on the archaeological find but in fact they will be exposed to a very tendentious narrative, which conceals periods of history

not associated with the Jewish past. The presence and story of the Palestinians of East Jerusalem, and the Old City and Silwan in particular, are out of view for the tourist who walks underground through the "Second Temple" layer or who arrives by cable car directly into tourist information hubs.

Therefore, we consider the initiative by the government of Israel to build a cable car a political initiative which is intended to link the village of Silwan to the west of the city. In order to mitigate against criticism and international pressure the developers of the cable car plan have agreed (for now) to make due without the station at the Mount of Olives. For the same reason the station which will be built within the Kedem Center is presented as the Dung Gate station whose role is to facilitate easy access for worshippers and visitors to the Western Wall. It seems as though no one has thought of the idea of creating a station which would make the Haram a-Sharif more accessible to Muslim worshippers. (Note: Muslims are forbidden from entering the Western Wall for security reasons. We assume that very few Muslims will make use of the cable car).

The cable car is another example of a project presented to the public as a tourism venture, but in fact its main raison d'être is political: strengthening Israeli hold over East Jerusalem. The construction of the cable car alongside the excavation of tunnels in the Old City and in Silwan and the construction of the Kedem Center will create a new reality in Jerusalem. The visitors, and the Israeli and Palestinian residents will find themselves in a very different Old City. It will be an Old City which is much more Israeli and Jewish from both a physical perspective and in terms of the city's national and political identity. It will become a city where from a birds eye view or considered from within an underground tunnel, it will be easy to forget that Palestinians live here and, therefore, that a peaceful solution for Jerusalem will necessitate some form of territorial compromise or shared sovereignty.

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