

## The Cable Car to the Old City: Who Gains and Who Loses?

### Background

On Wednesday, December 13, the National Infrastructure Committee met for a public presentation of the Old City cable car project. The transportation project was presented as a top national priority to connect East Jerusalem to its western part in a direct route and will be rapidly implemented. The Israeli cable car project will have transportational, economic, cultural, and political implications for the Old City and the Historic Basin. The new cable car will have detrimental effects on the residents and the preservation of the Historic Basin as a multilayered historic city and Jerusalem's multicultural character in the present.

The project was promoted by Minister of Tourism Yariv Levin and the Jerusalem Development Authority (JDA), which is part of the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage and is headed by Minister Elkin and supported by Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon. The current phase received a budget of 18 million NIS, intended for planning and public participation. The Ministry of Tourism decided to give precedence this project over others and to define it as a "national priority," a category that is usually reserved for advancing infrastructure and road construction projects.

The cable car was defined by the National Infrastructure Committee (NIC) as a transportation project designed to reduce congestion on the roads leading to the Old City. The selection of the cable car was presented as an informed decision that was taken after examining transportation solutions for a light rail or changes in the traffic arrangements for the routes leading to the Old City. According to the developers, after a thorough examination of various solutions, the cable car was found to be the most efficient, fastest, and cheapest solution. They claim that from the moment the work permits are received, it will be possible to finish construction of the cable car in 15 months at a cost of 200 million NIS. The planners promise that the cable car will be lower than the height of the old city walls.

In the first stage, the cable car route will comprise three stations: from the First Station site to Mount Zion, and from there to the Kedem Center at the entrance to Silwan. In addition, a depo for the cars will be built in Abu Tor near the Ha-Mefaked Street. The long-term plan, not currently approved, includes stations on the Mount of Olives and the Siloam Pool at the edge of the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood of Silwan. Most of the planning problems seem to be concentrated between the Mount Zion station and the yet-to-be-built Kedem Center in Silwan. In order to enable movement along this axis, a number of difficulties must be overcome, since it would entail demolishing several upper stories of houses in Silwan. The height of the planned Kedem Center will apparently need to be raised by about 2.5 meters. Today, the Kedem Center is expected to be the largest building in the Old City area, at more than 15,000 square meters and located only 20 meters from the Old City walls.

# Problems with the cable car plan in Jerusalem's historic basin

## A question of good governance

Discussions of the cable car plan are supposed to take place in the planning and building committees. However, by making use of the NIC to advance the project and defining it as a national priority, politicians have succeeded in bypassing the law and the planning authorities as well as the professional echelon responsible for environmental protection, planning, and conservation. Were the project examined through acceptable channels rather than bypass the committees, it would be possible to hold a comprehensive public and professional debate about it, and to arrive at more balanced decisions on the issue.

## Precedence

Israel has a number of cable cars, including at Masada and Haifa, where cable cars consist of only one or two cars. The cable car in Haifa is an agreed economic and transportation failure, while at Masada it is a necessity. The cable car in Jerusalem will operate 72 cars per hour and transport about 3,000 people. This is the first time that a cable car will be established as a major transportation vehicle in the heart of a city. It is clear that such an unprecedented experiment in a city of such historical and religious importance is a risky venture.

## Cable Car or Light Rail?

The Jerusalem Municipality and the Ministry of Transport are promoting other transportation solutions for the Old City. If a less experimental alternative is already in the works, then there is no need to undertake something like a cable car at the same time.

## Protecting the historical character of Jerusalem

In historic cities, it is accepted that the values of landscape and preservation should be protected, and not sacrificed in favor of gimmicks and innovations that are foreign to the city's historical character. The difficulty in dealing with the congestion caused by tourist traffic is a familiar phenomenon in many historical cities in the world, but none of them has so far built a cable car. In Venice, for example, it is inconceivable to build a cable car to overcome the transportation problems and inefficiencies of gondolas and sea buses. Why, then, is there such a disparaging attitude in Jerusalem to defending its historical uniqueness – a world cultural asset entrusted to us?



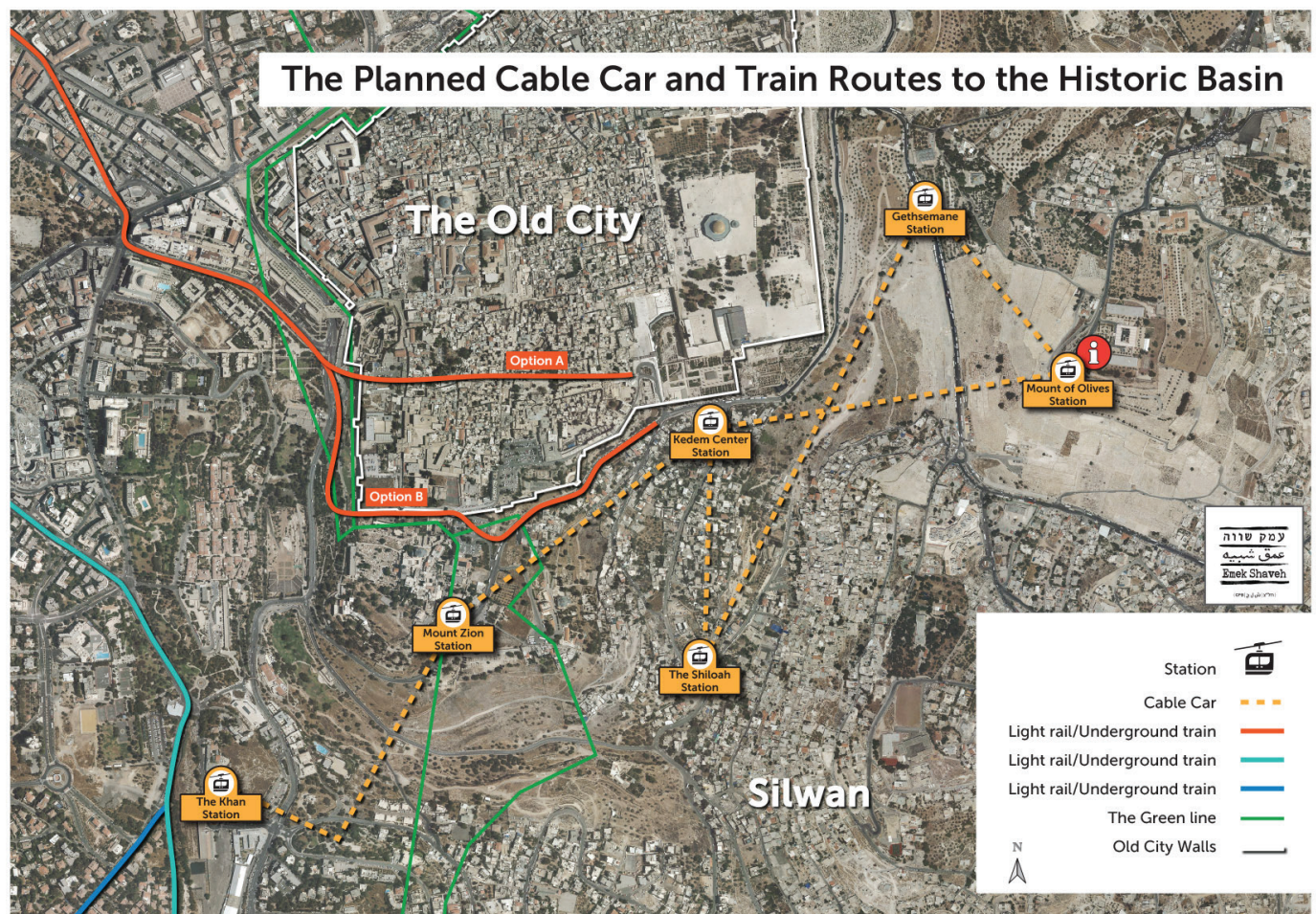
Simulated model of the planned cable car station in Baka neighborhood

## Harmful to the Landscape and Architecture

The planned cable car route to Mount Zion is designed to cross the Ben-Hinnom Valley. A section of the route leading to the Kedem Center will run parallel to the southern wall of the Old City. The developers are offering a traffic rate of approximately 72 cars per hour. Many support pillars will be fixed between the stations. According to this plan, the cable car line will become a very busy traffic artery involving cars moving along the Old City walls at almost any given time, amid an ugly landscape of support pillars and thick cables. This would constitute unprecedented harm to the landscape of the Old City and the Ben-Hinnom Valley. While currently the valley comprises a minor traffic route and a green belt preserving the natural beauty and antiquities, it will transform into a main transportation artery that will damage the famous city skyline. Many conservation experts and architects along with many within the general public are protesting the “Disneyland”-like bad taste of cars hovering over the Old City walls.

## Entering a historic city through a historic gate

The cable car is set to “discharge” its passengers into the Kedem Center. The entrance to the Old City would now be undertaken through tunnels or through Dung Gate. In order to understand Jerusalem and its historical development, it is better to enter it in the way it has been done for thousands of years: by foot, and through one of the main gates – Jaffa Gate or Damascus Gate.



## A World Heritage Site is no place for a cable car

In 2006, the Syrian government wanted to build a cable car to the Chevalier fortress in the north of the country. Unlike Jerusalem, access to the fortress of Chevalier is through a steep path to the top of the mountain. UNESCO’s professional bodies, such as ICOMOS, argued that a cable car should not be built on a World Heritage Site. Masada is the only world heritage site that is accessed by a cable car. In this case, UNESCO also demanded that the cable car not reach the site itself. Jerusalem is a world heritage site for many reasons, and it is of great importance to preserve its historical character which has great international appeal – and prevent construction that will undermine this character.

### **The cable car misses the target audience**

Most of the visitors to the Western Wall are ultra-Orthodox Jews as well as the bar-mitzvah celebrating public, who rarely visit the site. The Haredi public does not live near the cable car route, moreover bar mitzvah celebrants are not necessarily Jerusalemites who live in the vicinity of the First Station. Since the cable car is identified with the Jewish takeover of Silwan and East Jerusalem and will be operated by settlers or Jewish-religious bodies, it is reasonable to assume that very few Palestinians will use its services. Jerusalem's hotel clusters are also not close to the First Station, so its accessibility to tourists will not be comfortable or fast. If so, who will the cable car serve?

### **The White Elephant**

If the cable car will be unused, it will soon become an economic burden and much money will be wasted on the maintenance of its empty stations and cars. An example of this can be seen in the free bus line, which currently operates from the First Station to the Dung Gate and back, and is almost empty. A visit to the cable car in Haifa will give designers an idea of how inactive the cable car is. Unlike buses where the frequency of transport can be adjusted according to need, the cost of operating a cable car remains the same even if the numbers of travelers using this form of transport is small. The need to operate the cable car even when it is not profitable is an unnecessary expense for the managing authority.

### **Waste of Public Funds**

The budgets approved thus far for the cable car are 14 million NIS for the planning phase and 200 million NIS for construction. It is clear that these are only initial sums and that the actual costs are going to be much higher. Certainly, these sums do not include the operating costs and losses of revenue due to the fact that the cable car will not be operating on Saturdays and on Jewish holidays. Clearly, the city's residents and tourists would benefit far more from having such sums invested in improving existing public transportation services in Jerusalem.

### **Transportation Need or Tourism Venture?**

It appears that the political bodies promoting the cable car have not decided behind which fig leaf to hide the project. The Minister of Tourism has promoted puzzling clauses in an amendment to the Planning and Building Law that dealt with hotels, and incorporated a separate section enabling the construction of a cable car for touristic purposes of national priority, in a route that bypasses the planning committees. The public, on the other hand, is presented with a transportation plan purportedly designed to solve the problem of access to the Western Wall. Those entrusted with transit planning in Jerusalem on behalf of the Ministry of Transportation are not involved in the cable car project at all. Moreover, the project budgets do not come from the Ministry of Transportation. Those who worked to get the cable car out of the clutches of the planning committees probably knew very well that this unjustified project would have been blocked there (as happened in 2013 and 2015)

### **Harm to the Palestinian residents**

Although most of the area designated for the cable car is public, the residents of Silwan will be the immediate victims of the project, since the cable car will pass over their homes. The movement of dozens of carriages every hour, at an altitude of 5–9m above the houses of the residents, will be intimidating and will harm their quality of life immeasurably. The entrance to the Silwan cable car will be made via the Kedem Center, which belongs to the Elad Foundation, and it is unclear how the foundation will be required to allow free passage of Palestinians to and from the station. The pillars supporting the cars between the stations will damage the facades of the houses, and in some cases will be built on land belonging to the residents, churches or monasteries. In addition, it appears that the upper floors of a number of houses will be demolished in order to build the infrastructure for the cable car. It is highly doubtful whether such a project would have been undertaken over neighborhoods in the western part of the city or within Israel.

### **Detrimental to merchants of the Old City and its environs**

The business centers of Jaffa Street, Mamilla, and Salah ad-Din Street are based on tourist traffic to and from the Old City, and most visitors enter through Jaffa Gate and Damascus Gate. The construction of the cable car in the south of the city will create an alternative tourist route and will cause considerable economic damage to many merchants.

### **Economic profits to Elad and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation**

A new tourist transportation route, with a capacity of 3,000 people per hour to the Old City, will yield huge profits to the bodies that determine the route and the various stations along it. The major bodies to profit from this project will be Elad, which manages the City of David and the Kedem Center, and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which manages the Western Wall tunnels.

### **A historical narrative for a captive audience**

Unlike the present situation, where visitors who make their way to the Western Wall pass through the alleys and markets of the Old City, the experience of visitors arriving via the cable car to the Old City will be quite different: they will not move within a busy and varied urban fabric, but will be “funneled” to sites such as the City of David and the Western Wall tunnels where they will be charged an entrance fee. These sites present a “closed” narrative, which is shaped according to national-religious concepts, based putatively on archaeological findings, and conceals the non-Jewish parts of Jerusalem’s past. The presence and story of Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem, past and present, disappear as if they never existed as visitors walk underground in a “Second Temple reality” or arrive by air directly into tourism and information centers run by organizations with a controversial national-religious agenda.

### **Strengthening the settlement project in East Jerusalem**

The route of the first section of the cable car which leads to Mount Zion is within the 1967 borders of Jerusalem. But from Mount Zion to the Kedem Center, the route passes through East Jerusalem, mainly above the village of Silwan. The cable car route connects West Jerusalem to its eastern part. As mentioned, to begin with the cable car line will end in Silwan. Later, the route is planned to extend to the Mount of Olives and the Siloam Pool, which is located at the southern end of the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood of Silwan. The cable car project connects, from a transportational and public awareness point of view, sites in the historic city with the Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem. Transportation from the west of the city to the east will increase the frequency of visits to sites controlled by Elad in East Jerusalem.

**In conclusion,** The cable car is an experimental project driven by political interests in the most important and sensitive site in our region – the Old City of Jerusalem. Although this project is presented to the public as a response to transportation and tourism needs, its goal is political – strengthening Israel’s hold on East Jerusalem with a national-religious narrative and by “establishing facts on the ground” that will erase the chances of a historic compromise in the Holy Basin and the rich cultural diversity of the city. The cable car will also seriously damage the historical nature of the Old City and corrupt its famous beauty, which attracts visitors from all over the world.

