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### **The View from the Train** **Interrogating the HaEmek Train Corridor**

This project started as an investigation into the contradictions and crises inherent in settler colonial relations, as expressed through the lens of border zones and spaces in Israel/Palestine. It evolved into an exploration of the seemingly contradictory relationship between Israeli politics and geography, and the infrastructure it has constructed to bypass (and nullify) their dissonances. The project – which emerged from a CBRL Pilot grant – is still in its early stages. What follows is an initial glimpse into the conceptual and epistemological frames I will be using to analyse and understand its findings.

To tell the story of this research, I will need to introduce you to the 'HaEmek Railway' – Israel's newest railway line (as well as one of its oldest) – and the particular ways it produces and reproduces colonial relations in Palestine. My vantage is atypical, as rather than look inward at particular clashes over space between the Israeli state and its subject populations, I am looking outwards, at the way Israel is seeking to link, represent and normalise itself as part of a regional and global matrix of geo-economic relations (cf. Smith and Cowen, 2009).

### **Conceptual Framing**

The power and sovereignty of colonial space is asserted in its ability to become hegemonic, to articulate what is legitimate and moral through a variety of productive and violent means (Coulthard, 2014). Moreover, it renders itself in concrete, material forms, solidifying into that which we ultimately experience as normal, axiomatic; what David Harvey (2006), building from Henri Lefebvre's (1974) work on these themes, has discussed as inherent to developing our *geographic common sense*. Power congeals itself in 'things', which are then fetishised and severed from the multiple violences – the blood – that produce them (Chua, 2016). To explain further, while different conceptual methods order the way we think and engage with space, i.e. a map conceives and imagines a particular way of ordering the world – it is the material object that locates and fixes the violence of conceptual/imagined geographic relations. It translates it, concretises it, makes it irrefutable and seemingly permanent (cf. Yacobi, 2016). Thus 'things' take up an essential epistemology in my research – they have their own logics, their own ontologies, contingent upon how they interact with, disrupt, reorganise and become an ordinary part of the world around them. Yet they also tell us about the logics, power relations, abstract forces and subsequent struggles that produced them. It becomes an assemblage of relations, rather than a discreet object; a node in a network of flows (Cowen, 2014).

Thus, I look at this train to see what it can tell us about how its infrastructure recasts spatial relations, because of the particular way it moves and is moved through space; how it connects and produces particular hubs for the transport and accumulation of people, goods and ideas, and how it links and de-links particular markets and thus the communities that live off and from them (cf. Larkin, 2013). But it also can speak volumes about how Israel (re)produces itself – how it carves out its borders, maps its moral geographies, entrenches and erases its colonial encounters in local and

global terms, and especially how colonial violences become legitimate, ordinary, hidden, even normal, in this normal, ordinary thing.

### **Introducing The Train**

The HaEmek train line has been rendered 'invisible in plain sight' – something banal and technocratic and allegedly 'neutral' (cf. Cowen, 2014). In its current iteration, the trainline doesn't disrupt the current spatial order, nor dislocate or transfer populations. As a result, no one is really paying attention to it. This is what most fascinated me about the HaEmek train: because the more layers I uncovered, the more I understood its intersections with the long historical processes that have led to and continue to erode the futurity of Palestine.

So, let us begin with what we see in plain sight: The HaEmek Train line was launched in October, 2016, after a 65 year hiatus. Its route is approximately 60 km, traveling from the Haifa port to Beit Shean on the Jordanian border; a total of eight stations, along a single-gage rail, to where the train suddenly stops. According to its publicity material (including the new beautifully rendered signposts and old station buildings exhibited outside the Beit Shean station), the 'HaEmek' is the reinauguration of the Palestine branch of the Ottoman-built Hejaz Railway, which was built, with German ingenuity, in 1905, and once connected Haifa to Syria, Jordan, and onwards through the Arabian Peninsula (Israel Railways, 2016; cf. Cotterell, 2009; Mansour, 2006). Under British control, the line was further extended to Cairo, turning Haifa into a hub that connected all British imperial products and networks in the region. These connections were interrupted when the Haganah (the pre-state, Jewish militia) blew up the bridges that connected the train to Syria and Jordan (1946 and 1947) – and of course by the fact that after 1948, Palestine was formally severed from its territorial legacy, as the land bridge between Africa and Asia.

In the same publicity material, as well as myriad articles and projects that have followed in the wake of the train line's launch, we are constantly being told about the train's 'potential', as a human and economic link between Israel and the world, and, moreover, the infrastructure needed to connect Israel and the larger Middle East (cf. Jordanian Gateway Project, accessed 2017). During his speech at the train's inaugural run, Israel's Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu went so far as to call the HaEmek Railway 'a peace train', with the capacity to reconfigure Israel's relationship to the region (Office of the Prime Minister, 2016). In so doing, he not only pointed to the way Israel sees itself as leading an economic transformation in the Middle East, but as the inheritor of the railway's legacy, as a rightful part of Israel's past and present.

What is particularly interesting – or more expressly contradictory and problematic – about this claim, is the fact that Israel has spent endless resources on isolating itself socially, politically and culturally from the Middle East (Yacobi, 2016; Mendell, 2014). At the same time, it has done everything possible to bridge the distance between itself and Europe: joining its sports leagues, the Eurovision singing competition, research funding schemes, and European free trade and regulatory circuits, as part of the European policy neighbourhood. It famously calls itself a 'villa in the jungle', and intentionally produces itself as a European outpost – a colony – in the Middle East, with endless negative repercussions on its own indigenous Palestinian and racialised Arab-Jewish populations, let alone the global Palestinian population.

Thus there is also something telling about the fact that physically – ontologically – the HaEmek train doesn't actually connect to anything. It begins at the sea and ends inside Israel, at the Jordanian border – a truncated version of a previous colonial supply line that once connected Palestine, via sea and land, to the rest of the world. So then, what does this imply? How can a train to nowhere be sold and branded as a train to everywhere? Is it merely a 'pipe dream' as some interlocutors to this study have called it, or does the train tell us something about how new cartographies are being

articulated through the reshaping of global economic relations; and about how Israeli space is being reconfigured to accommodate these types of dislocated relationship, and in so doing further entrench its control of space and life in Palestine?

As part of our window into what the train 'tells us', other issues – most situated outside of our 'plain sight' – must be considered alongside the launch of the train. First, although a topic of discussion since at least the time of Shimon Perez's vision for 'a new Middle East', the route's construction only began (in earnest) in 2012. It coincided with the fact that in 2011, when the war in Syria exploded, land-routes for the transport of goods from Europe (Turkey) were cut, and re-routed; with some of those products clandestinely going through Haifa port, on trucks, travelling at night to the Jordanian border at Beit Shean (cf. Rabinovich and Cohen, 2014). The clandestine nature of this journey is important, because Israel has no normal trade relations with Middle Eastern countries, except Egypt and Jordan (and economic relations are often distilled on 'the down low' even with these countries, because of potential political backlash in the region). The trucks and their inventory travel through a system of bound customs, meaning that while they are subject to high tech security checks at the port, they pass through Israeli space in regulatory limbo to Jordanian border customs, leaving no paper trail that says these products ever touched Israeli ground. They arrive in Jordan and travel onwards to other Middle Eastern markets, including Iraq, the Saudi Kingdom and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The train, as a more efficient, controlled, inflexible but predictable mode of travel than the trucks – which are prone to accidents and congestion and more difficult to secure – could then be seen as part of an attempt to expand Israel's capacity to channel economic traffic through its borders, and link its own internal markets with these global flows. This is happening at the same time that other routes are being closed down, and at a time when other countries are deemed a risk for channelling lines of production and commodities, seen as integral to global market relations. We also need to see the train alongside two internal infrastructure projects, at the gateway points to the railway: First we have an influx of development capital and infrastructure in 2017/2018 into 'The Jordanian Gateway Project', a qualified industrial and free trade zone, initially constructed in 2000 to connect Jordanian and Israeli production economies (by linking them to free trade benefits in US markets). The industrial park is divided by the Jordan River, with one of its complexes – called 'the Israeli Gate' – situated on 65 acres of land, just north of Beit Shean. The other, 'the Jordanian gate', sits on 175 acres, on the Jordanian side of the border, and there is a promise of a bridge being built between them, while communities inside will be walled in and separated from their surroundings (Feuer, 2017). At the other gateway point, in Haifa, a new private port is being developed to siphon massive container ships to Israel. These two points have been directly linked in those imagining and presenting the future of the industrial park, through the carving out of a corridor – following the route of the HaEmek railway – between Jordan and Haifa port, as if there is nothing in between (JGIP, accessed 2017). We should also think about these projects alongside two other infrastructure-based developments: Israel's new and ever-expanding trade relationship with China, whose largest port company is going to be administering the new container port in Haifa; and Israel's participation in China's new massive global infrastructure project, known as the 'Belt and Road' Project, or 'the New Silk Road', which represents China's efforts to circumvent its dependence on US markets, while at the same time building more secure routes through insecure land and maritime transport corridors (Xian, 2016).

These projects point to a new cartographic sensibility in the Middle East, articulated in the work of Cowen (2014), Bernes (2013), Haggmann and Stepputat (2016) and others, as capable of subverting and renegotiating national territoriality; one which Israel seems keen on leading. These spaces are meant to channel the flow of goods across vast expanses of territory, through a tightly controlled and coordinated architecture of rail-lines, maritime corridors, and roadworks. By creating linking

lines between key nodes and hubs of transport, aka the Haifa Port and the Jordanian Gateway, they orchestrate a particular global cartography of narrow connectors that circumvent and concentrate friction at particular points; focusing on these bottlenecks, they work to further displace and override their potential interruption to the mobility and circulation of capital and stuff. The idea is to move across borders, reaching from the interior of one country into another – within them, space and time are compressed, elasticised, reconfigured to circulate ‘stuff’ as if there are no choke points or disruptions. Regulations and laws are different, security is tight, control and surveillance are integral, and so they exist alongside other lines and borders that contain potential disruptors to the corridor. In these terms, our train to nowhere can also be a train to everywhere, capable of dislocating (or more accurately, entrenching) the territorial logics of the colonial enclave, without Israel needing to change its political position vis a vis Palestine, or the Middle East.

Ultimately, as this project evolves, it will examine the way this corridor space is being used to smooth out, negotiate and bypass Israeli border relations. It will look at how the HaEmek train is part of an infrastructure being developed to sell ‘Israel’ as the logical site from which to orchestrate global trade networks, as they seek to move past potential disruptions, resistance and obstacles to the movements of global capital in the Middle East. At the same time, it is also meant to be an examination of ‘frictions’, stopgaps and bunkers, spaces that can help conceptualise new ways of thinking about Palestinian resistance, via new movements acting to disrupt global transport and trade infrastructure elsewhere (as discussed in Pasternak and Dafnos, 2017). Given that the corridor is entrenched and fixed in space and time, disruptions, frictions and resistance are inevitable; but first, we need to make sure that what is hidden in plain sight becomes visible to those of us who seek a different future in Palestine.

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