Background

On Monday, October 29, 2018, the National Infrastructure Committee (NIC) approved the submission of the cable car plan for the Old City. This project will have transportation, economic, cultural, and political implications for the Old City and the Historic Basin. The cable car will have detrimental effects on the residents, on preservation values, and on Jerusalem’s multicultural character.

The project was promoted by Minister of Tourism Yariv Levin and the Jerusalem Development Authority (JDA). The current phase received a budget of 18 million NIS, intended for planning and public participation. The Ministry of Tourism decided to give precedence to 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, thus effectively circumventing the planning committees intended to process such 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 existing 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 complete the 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 phase, 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 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 meant to take place in the planning and building committees. By making use of the NIC to advance the project and defining it as a national priority, politicians have succeeded in bypassing the planning committees as well as the professional echelon responsible for environmental protection, planning, and conservation. There is a real danger in the fact that this project, whose impact on Jerusalem’s historic landscape is dramatic and irreversible, is promoted in such an aggressive and reckless manner, and that it will be processed by a committee that affords the politicians maximum impact on decisions. Were the project to be examined through acceptable channels rather than bypass the committees, it would allow for a comprehensive public and professional debate conducive to greater balance in the decision-making process.

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 Transportation 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 historic 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?

Simulation of the cable car passing over Ben-Hinnom Valley, from the plan’s documents
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 “Disneyfication” of the Historic Basin and the aesthetic blight 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. In the case of Masada, UNESCO 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
The majority of visitors to the Western Wall are ultra-Orthodox Jews as well as the bar-mitzvah celebrating public, who otherwise 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 nationalist entities, 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 convenient or efficient. Moreover, many tour guides state that they will not use the cable car because it requires splitting the group over a number of cars. If this is the case whom will the cable car serve?

Who will finance the cable car?
Travelling on cable cars in Israel is not subsidized by the Ministry of Transportation [e.g. in Haifa], nor is there any guarantee that the cost of the cable car will be subsidized: the developers promise that the cost of the cable car will be equivalent to that of a bus ride and that it will be profitable. In reality, nowhere in the world has it been possible to profitably operate cable cars at a rate of public transport. In the case of the cable car in Jerusalem, no budget has even been approved to subsidize the cost of travel. Therefore, it is unclear how the developers will be able to meet this promise. The high cost of travel undermines the economic feasibility of the project.

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).

**The cable car will not ease traffic, but shift it elsewhere**
The cable car was not designed to be part of a comprehensive solution to the traffic congestion in Jerusalem. At most, it will rechannel heavy traffic to the First Station area and to the entrance to Bak’a and the German Colony. At present, the area of the First Station is crowded, and the parking lot is intended to provide a solution for the visitors to this location, not for the millions of visitors to the Old City. The planners boast of interfacing with light rail lines, but these have yet to be approved and will not be in service for many years.

**Detrimental to the residents of Silwan**
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 hover 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 extremely detrimental to their quality of life. 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, the upper floors of a number of houses may 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 project, 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 cross 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 diverse 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 views, 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 links 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 top of Wadi Hilweh neighborhood in Silwan. The cable car project connects, from a the point of view of transportation and public awareness, 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 grip on East Jerusalem with a national-religious narrative and by “establishing facts on the ground” that will erode the chances of a historic compromise in the Holy Basin and undermine the rich cultural diversity of the city. The cable car will also seriously damage the historic nature of the Old City and corrupt the famous skyline which attracts visitors from all over the world.