

The Jericho Gate Project: Planning Challenges and Political Struggles around a Megaproject in the Oldest City in the World

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Abstract: Starting from 1993, after decades of occupation and political conflicts, the Palestinians enjoy some form of local self-government in areas of the West Bank (areas "A"), through elected bodies like municipal councils and the National Government. Those young institutions that are in charge of urban planning, have to deal with a highly complicated set of challenges, with a very modest experience and a legacy of old and inadequate laws. In Jericho, a heritage-rich town in the Jordan Valley, the Palestinian company PADICO has recently proposed a leisure-oriented, multi-billionaire, 300 HA mega-project, called Jericho Gate (JG), including tourist and entertainment facilities, villas, hotels, resorts, a sports city, amusement and water parks, malls and other facilities. JG follows a national and regional trends of privately financed new cities that is common in the region (i.e. Rawabi), that are marketed as development and job creators, and as a tool to improve the living conditions of the Palestinians who are struggling for an independent and sovereign country. In this study we will explore and analyze how that project has been received by the different actors, in particular, the local and national government and the local public opinion, how it was presented to the population through the media and how it was debated and finally approved by the official bodies. Despite its glittering architectural envelop and its promise of economic development, the JG project arises a number of questions about the capacity of the local context to benefit from it. Will the municipality, weakened under the state of occupation, be able to handle the needs of the new temporary residents, given its modest resources and capabilities? Will this upper-class oriented project increase socio-spatial fragmentation between wealthy visitors and the local population?

Keywords: Mega Project, Conflict area, Planning challenges, Jericho- Palestine

Introduction

In the Jordan valley, almost in the lowest point, one can admire an Oasis in the desert, called “Jericho” the oldest city in the world, 8 km from the Dead Sea and from the “baptism site” in the Jordan river, 25 km from Jerusalem. It’s one of the Palestinian cities lying in area “A”, encompassing 20% of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, subdivided in Areas A, B and C based on the Oslo agreement between Palestinian and the Israeli. According to it, Palestinian can manage directly the civil and security issues in Area A. The municipal territory is surrounded by areas “C”, where the control of civil and security issues is in the Israeli hands. The area, as well as the Jordan Valley, has a very low population density due to the dry weather. Nowadays it has about 21107 inhabitants (PCBS¹, 2018), and it remains one of the few cities in area “A” that has unbuilt lands to be developed.

Starting from 1993, when the Oslo agreement was signed, and the hope of a final settlement of the Palestinian Israeli conflict was high, the economic situation of the Palestinian starts to improve. Since the 1990s, the real estate sector enjoyed an important growth, despite a slowdown during the difficult periods of the second intifada (2000-2005). After that, due in part to the high natural growth of population, the demand for new houses returned to be high. At the same time, because of limited available constructible land within area A, leading to a considerable increase of lands and houses prices, new kind of development appeared, such as the construction of entire neighborhoods and master planned cities like Rawabi, promoted by private sector investors². In the last decade, this new trend appeared in Jericho, notably in the form of the mega-project called “Jericho Gate” (JG), a 300 Ha new mixed-use development in the southern part of the city. Referred to as “a new integrated township”, by Mr Al-Sayed Ahmad, general manager of JG, in an interview on Arabian business, this large scale project will affect the economy and change the identity of the historical city. The city’s economy, primarily based on agriculture for centuries, is now possibly undertaking a transition to become a touristic city for leisure and entertainment, as the promoters of JG hope to attract more local and foreign tourists thanks to new cultural and commercial areas. Furthermore, the project boosts a large residential area of high-end second-homes addressing a clientele of Arabs coming from East Jerusalem and Israel.

This new project, completely market-driven by the private sector, are proceeding under a very weak planning system with enjoy a bad reputation as a tool of foreign ruling powers. Historically, The Palestinian Territory experienced successive occupations and was ruled by different authorities, such as the Ottoman, the British, the Jordanian and Egyptian and finally Israeli occupation that used the local planning as an instrument to control Palestinian urban development and to serve their colonial interests (Abed Alhamid, 2005). In fact, During the British Mandate (1920-48), "Master planning" approach was part of a British colonial policy aiming to control and

¹ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

² Interview with Mr Issa Qassis, CEO of Palestine Mortgage and Housing Corporation on <http://www.alhayat-j.com/sooq/HayatWaSouq143.pdf>

restrict Palestinians development at the local level by issuing orders and laws that facilitated land confiscation while restricting Palestinian communities expansion and growth (Coon 1992, Khamaisi 1994). This situation continued during the Jordanian administration in the West Bank and the Egyptian administration in Gaza Strip. After 1967, the Israelis have continued to use the same planning laws and regulations, while modifying them to meet their own interests of land confiscation and control over Palestinian growth (Abed Alhadi, 1990; Coon, 1992; Khamaisi, 1994; MOLG, 2005). During all these periods, the planning system was considered a tool to confiscate Palestinian lands, to restrict development and a prelude to further expropriations and dispossessions. Israel policy contributed to make it clear in the Palestinian mind that land use planning, land expropriations and settlements are three interlocking aspects of a global policy aimed at the Judaification of the territories occupied in the 1967 (Abdulhadi, 1990).

When the Palestinian national authority (PNA) took the control of civil matters on areas “A” and “B”, including the responsibility for urban planning, they inherited a system whose evolution has been greatly influenced by the previous Israeli military orders and regulations, as most of them remain applicable in the Palestinian territories (MOLG, 2005; Daoud, 2009). The planning approach and process remained centralized, not participatory, physical oriented only, with no consideration of community's developmental aspects. Thus planning efforts remained largely inefficient, time consuming and rigid, and considered as a problem rather than as a solution for most of the Palestinian cities and villages. Despite the adoption of the Physical Planning Manual in 2010 by the PNA, a new planning tool that introduces of the analysis of community needs in development and mandates some form of community participation, the new planning processes are still not consolidated and young³.

While the unprecedented scale and cost of JG may result in substantial social and economic transformations in Palestine and the historical city of Jericho, this development has not received scholarly attention to date. Most attention has been paid by local media: short articles have been published in newspapers and Palestinian TV has broadcast interviews with the developers and some stakeholders about JG. This paper aim to fill a gap in the literature on Palestine's new cities, by exploring the national ambitions manifested in the JG project, contextualizing it within the international new cities trend, and providing an overview and preliminary analysis of JG's detailed plan. We also critically examine challenges facing JG with regards to sustainability and relation with the local authorities, mainly the Jericho Municipality (JM). This paper draws on several sources for material including: JG's own promotional material, interviews and reports on different Palestinian Newspapers, official documents from the Palestinian Ministry of Local Government (MoLG) and the JM, personal interviews with JG officials and JM's staff directly involved in dealing with the project conducted in Jericho in the beginning of 2019, and documents and recommendation about JG issued during the preparation of the Jericho Master Plan⁴ of 2012-2014.

³ Interview with Tamara Erikat from Jericho Municipality in 2019).

⁴ Project funded by the Italian cooperation finalized to prepare a model of sustainable development through new Master Plan for the city of Jericho in collaboration with the university of Ferrara and JM in the period of 2012-2014.

Building to Communicate

Recent scholarship illustrates how cities are not only the medium by which the powerful express their influence, but they can also reveal the aspirations of the State and how it wishes to be seen by others (Vale 2008 [1992]). In this sense, a primary objective of many master planned cities is to construct, communicate, and normalize a particular sense of identity to the citizenry (Moser, 2012). This dynamics are already at play in another recent project in Palestine: Rawabi, a completely master planned city, the first of its kind in the West Bank. With this project, Palestinians are trying to express and send a message to the world: they are not only the bad and violent people depicted by international media, but they are also able to build modern cities and neighborhoods, improve themselves and be civilized⁵. As city building is a powerful vehicle for expressing ideology due to its highly visible and symbolic nature, the Palestinian government supports these types of economic activities and encourages them by facilitating the approval process and by providing some basic services, such as police and civil defense stations, health centers, etc.

Palestinians also construct houses to express their intention to remain in their lands and not to leave and immigrate despite the occupation, they use to do so constructing even along the cities edges far from the main infrastructures and services, this way of thinking or doing is leveraged by the developers to promote their projects saying that their efforts support the resistance against the occupation.

Building to protect vs Building to confiscate: Who build first?

The Israelis are continuing to construct housing units everywhere in areas “C” of the West Bank. From 1967 through 2017, over 200 Israeli settlements were established in the Palestinian Territories (including East Jerusalem) and their current population is almost 620,000 inhabitants (B’Tselem, 2019). Israeli settlements are visible as they surround the Palestinian cities and so are part of Palestinian’s everyday landscape, when passing by the main roads. This constant physical presence affects profoundly the Palestinian mentality, vehiculating the idea that Palestinians should build as much as possible to protect their lands from confiscation. This “rush to build first” is happening with no connection to real needs and without thinking into account minimum sustainable planning criteria. Thus, when developers are proposing such projects to the public opinion, it’s very difficult to oppose it on factual grounds or even to open an objective discussion about the real need, because of a diffused idea that building new houses means to save the land from confiscation. This message is strongly leveraged by promoters: talking about a real estate project in the Jericho governorate called ‘Moon City’, Eng. Munif Treash, CEO of the Ammar Group⁶, said that this type of projects aims to protect the Palestinian lands and to increase the population density in the Jordan valley area⁷.

⁵ Interview with the founder of Rawabi, Mr Bashar al Masri, 2015.

⁶ Amaar Group is Palestinian investment fund’s investment arm in real estate development, and was established in 2009 with a declared capital of 140 Million U.S. Dollars.

⁷ Interview on Alwatanvoice, 2014.

The approval Process

Planning of JG has been a lengthy and challenging process. Jericho's residents expressed concerns fearing that the project could come to somehow replace Jericho, serving as "a new city", that will feel like a new Dubai," as Hulileh⁸ puts it. The municipality and the Governorate, found it a big challenge to deal with such unprecedented large-scale project. In public meetings the promoter of JG, Padico, used spectacular and appealing ways to present the project, advertising it as a job creator, of capital importance for the national economy, and, of course, as a tool to protect land from Israeli confiscation. Most of the people attending these meetings were in favor of JG. In other meeting and political discussions, promoters stated that this project would increase the Palestinian population in Jordan Valley area, that because of its very low population density is threatened of be confiscated by Israeli to construct more settlements. Mohammed Abu Mohsen, director of the Finance department in the municipality, 2019, thinks that such project will create a real economic development in the city, bringing new residents from the middle and high class that will benefit local businesses, since they mostly come from outside the city. Others believe that the project will improve social cohesion among Palestinians, as different people from different part of Palestine will live close to each other, as was the case in Jericho for many years.

When the project was first proposed in 2011, the municipality was preparing a new master plan, the Jericho Master Plan (JMP) funded by the Italian cooperation, by a group of Italian and local planners in close collaboration with the Municipality and the ministry of local government (MoLG), which is responsible for approving and following the planning process. The leader of the JMP planning unit, Prof. Paolo Ceccarelli, expressed worries and perplexity about JG project. In fact, the area of JG was located outside the old Master plan, and the new master plan didn't envision to expand the city in the southern area where JG was proposed. Based on natural growth and the assessment of the actual situation, like population growth and available natural resources, primarily water, the JMP considered that there was no need for such a large expansion of the built-up area and that it was extremely difficult to guarantee its economic and environmental sustainability. Moreover, a high number of empty plots and tracts of lands inside and around the actual built-up are, accounting for about 1439 ha, were still available for infill development (JMP, 2014).

Despite the concern expressed by the JMP team, the approval process went forward with several meetings between the developer, the municipality and other stakeholders. Changes were made as the municipality asked to apply the standard building regulations mandated in the Palestinian cities, requested to allocate service areas for public use, and to avoid high density and multi-storied buildings. The detailed plan was approved by the municipality and, following the normal procedural steps through the regional committee, the supreme planning council, and a period of objection period, the project obtained the final approval on March 2015⁹.

⁸ Hulileh is the CEO of PADICO company.

⁹ Interview with Tamara Erikat from JM, 2019.

CHALLENGES AND SHORTCOMINGS OF A NEGOTIATED PLANNING PROCESS

JG Project: Exploration and Analysis (a flawed market background)



Figure 1: Entrance Design of the new neighborhood of JG as appeared on a Palestinian economic web site of Aliqtisadi. Source: http://www.aliqtisadi.ps/ar_page.php?id=15ad47by22729851Y15ad47b

The project is being led by Munib al-Masri's Palestinian conglomerate Padico Holding, and is aiming for a \$3 billion worth of investment by the time it is completed in 2024. It will encompass 300 Ha, 7% of the area of JM and almost the size of the existing built-up area of Jericho. When finished, it will have 1,500 villas, up to seven hotels, a water park, along with a shopping complex and a museum.

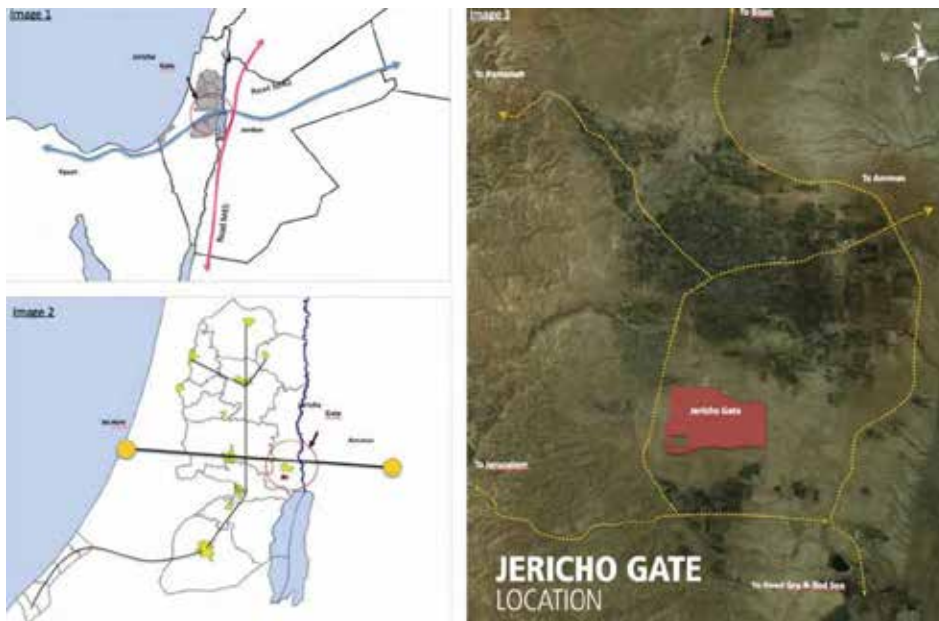


Figure 2: Location of Jericho Gate Project. Source: <http://www.jerichogate.com>

An early planning stages in 2011, Padico identified what they believed to be an important gap in the market for hotels, restaurants, and most importantly, attractions "if you want to stay there for a whole day" for short-time visitors. According to Hulileh, Jericho is visited annually by around 1

million Palestinian tourists, 1 million foreign tourists, as well as another 1.5 million crossing through to Jordan at Allenby Bridge; thus, "you need to entertain them, to take care of them."

JG is situated in the Southern part of the city, and it is advertised as strategically positioned only 50 Km from Amman, 25 Km from Jerusalem and 8 Km from Dead Sea, so theoretically located within a short car trip from large urban areas and main touristic attraction. In reality, as anyone who is familiar with this region knows, the main important travel factor here is the time and not distances, as travel time are highly uncertain because of fixed and "flying" check points, border controls and by pass roads that unpredictably affect movements time and freedom.

An unbalanced detailed planning negotiation

The detailed plan (DP) of the project was negotiated and approved by the different local, regional, national levels, after a process of meeting and adjustment characterized by external pressure by different actors in favor of the project. The approved plan comprise different land uses and some rules regarding the types of materials and shapes of buildings, all aiming at conserving a "high quality and modern" urban environment. The residential zoning is the larger one and represents 43.31% of the total area, followed by different uses like commercial, touristic and cultural. It is worth mentioning that the DP envisions the presence of 35400 m² of "aquatic elements", as this will be a big challenge for the developer given the water scarcity in the desert climate of Jericho.

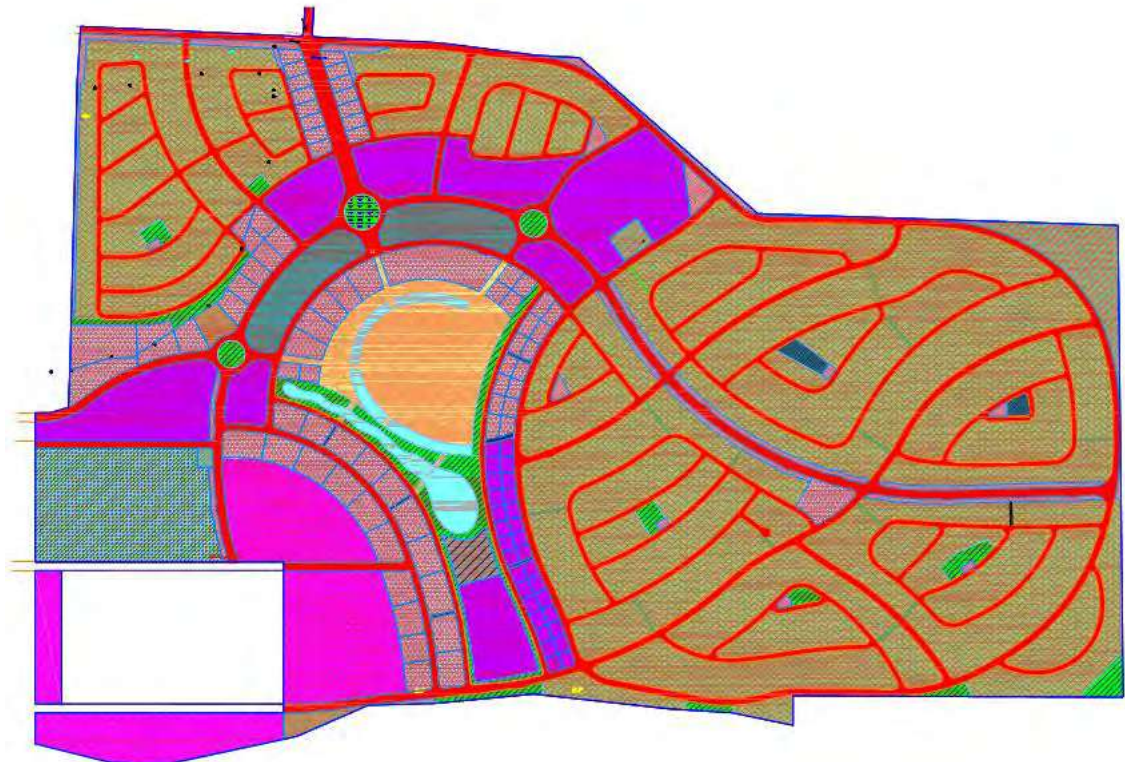


Figure 3: Land uses Plan of JG, Source: JM



Figure 4: Different Land Uses of JG Project, Source: JM

All residential buildings can be no more than 3 floors high, while in the area zoned for tourist, commercial, cultural and entertainment purposes (around 26,77% of the total), 6 floors will be allowed. The exception is made the “Jericho Tower”, a multi-storied and multi-purposes iconic building (commercial, tourist and residential), that will represent the architectural identity of the project; with its 50m height, it will be by far the tallest in Jericho, a relatively horizontal city, well known in Palestinian imaginary as the cities of low heights buildings, and renewed worldwide as the “Oasis city”, with a spectacular landscape, where palms and trees cover buildings and look tallest than them. The JG project is a major shift from this urban landscape.

There are also some aesthetic rules regarding the external appearance of buildings, such as the material to be used in residential buildings’ facades that have to be built from hollow blocks with plastering finishing. Nevertheless, this aesthetic became common in the area during the modern period, while the traditional construction technique in Jericho employed mud adobe and finishing. Unfortunately, the DP shows no interest in the use of mud construction techniques, which are the natural and original material used in the past in Jericho, Furthermore, any other types or material have to obtain previous approval by the owner (JG Company), other rules regarding water containers and Satellite dishes on top of houses, have to be covered and invisible.

During the preparation of JMP, Prof. Paolo Ceccarelli, in one of his letters to the mayor of Jericho, regarding some of the basic regulations for new large-scale residential estates in undeveloped areas, formulated some guidelines based on the need to adequately preserve the unique landscape of Jericho that constitutes one of its main attractions. The main concerns were regarding the height of the buildings, size of the parcels, open spaces and the adoption of sustainable architecture principles.

Analyzing the DP regulation, we can observe that JG project accepted completely or in part some of Ceccarelli’s recommendations, while ignoring others (see the comparative table 1 below):

Table 1: Comparison between Detailed Plan of JG and Paolo Ceccarelli’s recommendations

Criteria	DP of Jericho Gate	Paolo Ceccarelli’s recommendations
Height of the buildings	3 floors for residential	Two floors
	6 floors for touristic and commercial	
	15 floors for Jericho Tower	
Size of the parcels	750 m ²	1,000 m ²
size of the buildings	Max 225 m ²	Max 200 m ²
floor space ratio	30%	20%
Building types	Not Traditional Villa with pool style	architectural tradition of the region
Building materials	traditionally used in the lower Jordan Valley	traditionally used in the lower Jordan Valley
Sustainable architecture		
Water recycling	The project will be connected to the treatment plant of JM	Must be
Water Saving	There are different water elements for tourist and houses like pools and aquatic games	Must be
Passive solar energy design	No rules, depend of the developers	Must be

Ununcertain phasing

A controversial aspect of the project is the implementation phases of the JG. To date, it is still uncertain which is the planned order, which parts of the project (housing, hotels, commercial facilities, etc...) will be implemented first and how long it will take to fully implement the project.



Figure 5: Under construction’s roads. Source: <https://geomolg.ps> and: <http://www.jerichogate.com>

The high uncertainty of market demand and of the general political situation makes such predictions on the project time schedule very complicated. In the selected business model the JG main developer will only provide the main infrastructures while other developers will purchase the land and invest in the implementation of the different parts of the project. Few information have been provided by the JG company about the possible timing, apart from a generic three phases schedule as in figure 6. No agreement has been signed with official bodies engaging the company on an official phasing, and the planning law does not provide any guideline or restriction about that. In discussion I had about this issue with one of the employers if JG company, he confirmed that it depends totally on market demand and supply¹⁰.



Figure 6: Project's Phases. Source: <http://www.jerichogate.com>

Jericho Gate Project is envisaged to be developed over 10 years in three major phases as seen in figure 6. Phase one has already started and will expand until the end of 2018. Phase 2 will commence in 2019 through 2021. Phase three will commence in 2022 (Interview with Al-Sayed Ahmad from JG Project,2016), based on the aforementioned information and the DP analysis, we can explore the contents of the three phases of the project as below:

Phase 1

Phase 1 will include the construction of the main infrastructures by the JG main company itself, the realization of the project core which includes a vast complex of hotels and villas centering around a plaza with artificial lakes, the eponymous “Jericho Gate”, a structure equal in size to

¹⁰ Interview with Omran Abu Sbeih, March 2019.

Paris' Arc de Triomphe (Hulileh, 2017), the aforementioned Jericho tower. Further touristic and aquatic areas, hotels and recreations will be implemented by other developers.

Phase 2

Phase 2 include the first residential area and other tourist and commercial zones. Once the residential area is completely built and inhabited, the total population will be of around 7600 inhabitants, (considering three floors and the media of family size 5.6 (PCBS, 2017)), almost the population of the Aqbet Jaber refugee camps, which is less than 1.5 km far. The head of license department in JM believes that the building typologies will be large villas, which means single-family houses with two floors (interview, 2019), this mean that the number of expected residents will reach a maximum of about 2600 residents.

Phase 3

Phase 3 is envisaged as completely residential area, including around 1500 plots where building up to three floors are allowed, so if full completed and inhabited it will potentially accommodate more than 25000 inhabitants (considering the media of family size 5.6 (PCBS, 2017)). This would mean duplicating the number of the city population with this phase alone. Even if larger single family dwelling are constructed, as is more probable, it can still accommodate up to 9000 residents.

Project progress

During a site visit made in March 2019, we observed works on infrastructures, like roads, water and waste water pipes and electrical/telecommunications cables are undergoing. Furthermore, villas construction in phase two has already started, while no construction for commercial or tourist purposes within phase one has yet commenced.

Since there is no external control on phasing implementation, the JG company is following markets request, so in reality implantation phases of DP are purely indicative and the administrative body of JG is changing it continuously, and so it is doing with the DP itself¹¹: some requests of changing are already being submitted to the municipality to emend the DP, requesting, for example, to reduce the water element due to the clear water scarcity or changing the number of hotels¹².

¹¹ Interview with Omran Sabaih from JG, March 2019

¹² Interview with Tamara Erikat from JM, March 2019.



Figure 7: Residential Villas construction in phase Two, Source: Mohammed Isayed, 2019

A mega Project without local agreement

Despite the formal planning process, the municipality of Jericho didn't reach any understanding with JG Company. Several meetings were held throughout the process, but without tangible results, and local request were regularly ignored or downplayed. For example, despite the municipality clearly stressed many times that it was not able to provide the needed services for the new population in JG, notably an adequate supply of drinking water, these concerns were outplayed, as the JG company assured that they were planning to supply the site with water from Mekarot¹³ and not the Jericho municipal network¹⁴. However, as no final deal or agreement have been signed with Mekarot, the municipality officials and council members fear that the municipality will be responsible for providing water and other basic services (as they are mandated by law) and that they can guarantee it only based on its availability. To protect itself, the municipality find itself forced to write it in a statement on "the site plan", an official document which the municipality issues when citizen request for a building licenses.

Moreover, as Municipality Licenses fees and other fees related to building constructions have already been paid by the JG Company, the municipality is in theory mandated by law to provide basic services. Unclear regulations and leave little leverage to the municipality to regulate a development that can potentially put a huge burden on local financial and natural scarce resources, that's why the municipality think an agreement is essential to clarify the obligations and rights of each parts for such mega project.

An alternative to the real Jericho and the worries of social segregation

"People do not like this word 'entertainment'," says Samir Hulileh (interview on Maan news, June 3, 2015) the project's chair and CEO of Padico. "They feel that it is contradicting what

¹³ Mekarot is the national water company of Israel and the country's top agency for water management.

¹⁴ Interview with Eng, Mohammed Fityani, head of water department in JM, 2019.

occupation is all about". But he adds: "There is no way that anyone can know when this conflict will end, and we believe it's a must that people should survive the conflict and survive the process until it ends. Survival does not mean that we just barely live."

About one million local visitors (Jericho SDIP¹⁵, 2018-2021) are coming to Jericho annually to enjoy the good weather in different tourist facilities (Hotels, restaurants, commercial buildings) so there is a risk that most of these tourists will be diverted to JG instead while leaving existing local businesses in the city center deserted. The new indications at the main entrance of Jericho are already tempting the visitors to go to the new development.



Figure 8: Street signage in the entrance of Jericho city in the southern part. Source Isayed, 2019.

Conclusions

JG is rising in a context where there is insufficient awareness and capacity, both on official and unofficial levels, to deal with the potential consequences of such a large development. This mega project, that can potentially transform in depth the identity and the landscape of a unique and historical city, has been handled through a very weak and immature planning system, with no obligations regarding the management of implementation, leading to continuous requests by the developer to amend the DP to adapt it to changes in market demand, with little capacity for the municipality to oppose profit-driven request of the developer. The case of JG shows in these market-driven urban mega projects, a totally new trend for Palestine, the government and the local authorities managed to play only a passive and minimal role in the decision-making process, despite the fact that this development address to a limited range of the population and have a big impacts on the rest of the it, probably a very negative ones, such as social segregation, competition over scarce natural resources, loss of job and turnover in existing city businesses, etc.

To mitigate this outcomes, the government and the municipality of Jericho should move forward to sign, as soon as possible, a solid agreement with JG company to deal with the sustainability issues of this mega-development, as it will affect the city, determining reciprocal rights and obligations in order to save what can be saved, reducing the impact on the historical city of Jericho.

¹⁵SDIP is the Strategic Development and investment Plan

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