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AGRICULTURE AND TRANSPORT TODAY'S PRESSING ISSUES

## Can the Med rescue Beirut's commuters?

Planners are thinking up creative remedies for Lebanon's transport woes: go offshore or renovate the coastal railway line which served the country well in Ottoman days

BY DON DUNCAN

**L**EBANON's traffic reflects the tensions that have pulled at this small country for generations. It flows along two primary axes: the north/south coastal "Autostrade" is a line that has traditionally linked western-facing Lebanon to its far-flung European patrons; the west-east "Damascus line" route echoes Lebanon's Arab allegiances. Whichever axis, if you're on any highway trying to get into or out of Beirut in rush hour, you certainly aren't going anywhere fast.

Sixty per cent of Lebanon's population (2.4 million) live along the coast, and 500,000 of them make a torturous daily commute to and from the capital. Inside the city, the pre-automobile street planning can barely accommodate the growing number of cars, and each day Beirutis faces gridlock.

Bliss Street in the bustling Hamra district has an animated drag of food stalls to one side, to the other the verdant campus of the American University of Beirut. The street epitomises Lebanon's transport woes: orchestral honkings, a cacophony of radio stations, road rage, chain smoking taxidrivers, opportunistic scooter riders, all forming a thick, noisy, immobile fabric.

But every few years, when Bliss Street is due for a new layer of asphalt, signs of the city's old public transportation prowess – tram lines – peek through its worn surface. Elsewhere, in Mar Mikhael, a trendy East Beirut neighbourhood, vintage engines sit on rusted tracks that once extended as far south as Haifa and north to Istanbul and beyond, connecting to Europe. With a rail network built in the late 1800s, and an extensive tram network built in Beirut in the early 1900s – both by the Ottomans – the public transport system was once the most developed in the region, making Lebanon the most important merchant gateway between East and West.

But with the advent of cars and trucks, Lebanon decommissioned its rail network; and in the late 1960s it tarred over Beirut's tram lines. Today, those commuting by road face journeys three times longer than they once were.

## Return to square one

Government and independent transport strategists seek solutions; but Lebanon is in debt to the tune of some \$55bn – one of the largest per capita public debt rates in the world – so enormous, publicly-funded projects aren't feasible. Strategists need to be creative and look for cost-effective

solutions. The minister of economy and trade, Mohammed Safadi, has thought of returning to square one: the rail infrastructure of the Ottoman period. Though rusted and overgrown, much of the disused rail network still exists and the land the railway ran on is still technically government property.

As part of a larger development plan for Lebanon, Safadi is proposing to renovate the coastal branch of the line, linking Beirut to Jounieh, Jbeil and Tripoli in the north and to Saida and Sour to the south. From this railway line, roads will connect with inland population centres in the mountains, and beyond them in the Bekaa valley. "The railway will in time help Lebanon become one single market from south to north and east to west," said Antoine Constantine, an advisor to Safadi. "It will enable the decentralisation of industry which is currently clustered around Beirut, and it will spread a much larger economic power to the rest of the country."

The rise of the class-bound automobile, and the parallel decline of more democratic forms of public transport, contributed to some of the precarious social conditions in Beirut that saw the country collapse into civil war in 1975. Industry began to centralise in the capital, bringing poorer workers to the city as commuting from the rest of the country became less feasible. As a result, the "misery belt" – a hodgepodge of destitute slums and refugee camps – developed around Beirut and became a cradle for the heady revolutionary ideologies that sparked in the capital in the early 1970s.

Safadi's vision would benefit Lebanon's economy and quality of life, but the real dividend, in a country where sectarianism is still raw and precarious, would be political. The cabinet has adopted the proposal and the Lebanese army is undertaking a feasibility study of the disused railroad.

But this is where the project may fail: tracts of the line have been built over illegally since it was put out of commission, and while in law the government can re-appropriate the land, many politicians or their cronies have business interests in the numerous coastal resorts that sit on the line. In Lebanon's cautious system of consensus politics, such interests impact on the kind of legislation Safadi's project requires.

## 'Only our sea will rescue us'

To avoid this entanglement of politics and private business on land, public transport strategists are looking to solve the problem offshore. "Only our sea will rescue us from traffic congestion," says Khaled Taki, president of the Arab Franchise Association and owner of a franchise consultancy in Beirut. When many of his staff began to resign because of their untenable commutes, Taki decided to act. Inspired by water transport systems in London and New York, he designed a water shuttle service, called Beirut Water Taxi, connecting Beirut with seven coastal cities, slashing commuting times by up to a third of what they now take in rush hour. A law to provide for the implementation of his proposal will be tabled in parliament by the Future Bloc, headed by the prime minister, Saad Hariri.

Taki's franchising expertise may be useful in devising a maritime solution for a cash-strapped government. The boats and minibuses feeding the terminals will cost \$25m in the initial stage, funded by private investors who, he says, are all lined up. For the terminal infrastructures – another \$25m – Taki decided to commercialise: each terminal will become a shopping mall, built and run by a primary franchisor, with spaces given out to franchisees and then to small and medium enterprise sub-franchisees.

Lebanon has a major asset for such projects: a healthy banking system which, thanks to

conservative lending practices, has avoided the worst of the global economic crisis. Deposits in Lebanese banks are high and there is plenty of investment capital available for the right project. Beirut Water Taxi has been sold to these investors, Taki says, but is waiting for the crucial legislation; once passed, it could be up and running within a year.

The Beirut Water Taxi model is raising criticism from some transport strategists who see it as part of the continuing eclipse of the public sector by free-market economics.

“This is another example of the ‘Dubaisation’ of Beirut,” says Sophie Lampsos, a Lebanese researcher living in Brussels and a member of the urban planning advocacy collective El Hub. “If you are financing it in a private way then you’re going to have to have a private business plan, and with private business plans people want a [quick return on investment]. It’s very short-term cashflow and it’s not compatible with public planning.” El Hub’s competing maritime solution is for the state to provide low-cost floating platforms which private ferry operators would pay to use; space adjacent to the platforms would act as an interface between the planned sea transport system and the current chaotic land transport system of shared public taxis and minibuses.

But Beirut Water Taxis is the project closest to fruition, this in a country developing a tradition of privatised public space. The best-known example is Solidere, a private appropriation, reconstruction and commercialisation of Beirut’s war-torn downtown area.

However, it may never happen. Lebanon’s public transport landscape is strewn with failed projects like Taki’s and Safadi’s. The maritime transport law designed to enable the Beirut Water Taxi project is nowhere near tabling. In the meantime Lebanon has entered a grave and deepening political crisis around the UN Special Tribunal charged with naming the killers of former prime minister Rafik Hariri (assassinated in 2005). Some fear it could lead to another civil war. Public works projects stagnate with political paralysis; when it comes to private financing, will investors have the patience or gall to wait?

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