

WIDE ANGLE

The Palestinian Arc in Chalk

At the request of a private American foundation, an urban planner studied what a viable Palestinian state could be. At the end of 2004, the project was planned out, mapped, and quantified: a Palestine in the shape of an arc with a high-speed train for a backbone. A utopia anchored in reality.

Had enough of the morose litany of depressing news out of the Middle East? Then let's dream a little and let's go straight there. So this would be a country that would be named Palestine: the West Bank to the north, Gaza to the south, and East Jerusalem as the capital. It is 2020, the journalist who grew old on the job returns to Jenin, in the north of the Palestinian state, for a background report on the Palestinian Silicon Valley. Jenin - he remembers that eighteen years ago he was there, in the middle of a field of ruins to count the dead. The odor of corpses, the mountain of rubble left by the Israeli bulldozers, the survivors weeping without tears, dazed by three weeks of siege. All that seems so unreal now. The former refugee camp blends into the city, he remarks, taking the wide boulevard, some ten kilometers long, that leads to the train station.

The Palestine-Express departs from there. In an hour and a half the high speed train reaches Rafah, 225 km. south of the Gaza Strip. From the air conditioned railway car, the undulating landscape of the West Bank flies past: barely twenty minutes between Nablus and Jerusalem, some sixty kilometers that it had taken the journalist eight hours to travel in February 2002 during the Intifada because of the checkpoints. His fellow passenger, a young Palestinian computer expert who works in the Emirates, has trouble believing him. After passing Hebron, the train travels down onto the plain, crosses the Negev desert, and continues its long comma-shaped path to the Gaza International Airport. Getting off the train, immediately boarding Air Palestine flight 242 for Dubai! This is the Palestine that the reporter imagines, closing the thick report written by an American urban planner, Doug Suisman: The Arc, a formal structure for the Palestinian state (1). No one had previously attempted to imagine concretely what that state could look like.

A foundation with a conservative reputation

On the eve of the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, promised for this summer, Palestine remains a chimera. Gaza is a prison-shantytown where 1.3 million Palestinians live. More than two out of three inhabitants live there on the threshold of poverty. The airport is unusable. The port is yet to be built. For most Gazans, who have only seen Jerusalem on television, the West Bank remains an unknown land. As for the West Bank, it is a disjointed patchwork, checkered with military barricades, embankments, and detour roads. Soon Jerusalem will be surrounded by a belt of Jewish colonies.

Under these conditions, it takes a good dose of obliviousness or optimism to imagine an independent Palestine, prosperous and in peace. But it is well known that Americans are very naïve and incurable optimists. So it was the Rand Corporation, a private foundation based in Santa Monica, California, that took on the project. A surprising initiative, given the conservative reputation of Rand and its ties to the military establishment. Condoleezza Rice and Donald Rumsfeld sat on its board of directors. But the venerable Rand Corporation, founded in 1948, does not like to be equated with the neoconservative think tanks that, like the American Enterprise Institute or the Heritage Foundation, argued for the invasion of Iraq. Rand did nothing other than take George W. Bush at his word when he consistently talked about two states - a Palestinian state and an Israeli state - living side by side in peace. In the United States also, the idea of a Palestinian state ended up drawing recognition as an obvious fact.

33 billion dollars

An initial report, *Building a Viable Palestinian State*, funded by two wealthy private American donors, David and Carol Richards, was written in 2003. All the disadvantages of the future state were thoroughly examined, beginning with the demographics: between now and 2020 the Palestinian population will have doubled, reaching 6.6 million and creating an intolerable pressure on the economy, water resources, security, etc. The authors concluded that 33 billion dollars (27.5 billion euros) will be needed for the first ten years as well as a thorough reform of its “corrupt, totalitarian, and unrepresentative” institutions.

The second report, published in early 2005, is Doug Suisman’s report. Its genesis is worth telling. “At the beginning, Guilford Glazer, a wealthy donor, came to see us,” recounts Steven Simon, of Rand. “He was very troubled about the potential effects of the return of the Palestinian refugees who were in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon on the stability of the future Palestinian state.” Glazer, 83, made his fortune in the construction of commercial centers and supermarkets. He is one of the 400 richest Americans. As a good American used to wide open spaces, this builder imagined a new city. Very impressed by the memory of Roosevelt’s great works in the Tennessee Valley, where he comes from, the Jewish entrepreneur, who was a friend of Moshe Dayan, served as a low profile emissary to the Middle East under the Reagan administration.

“His naivety was a great asset”

Rand thus announced a call for proposals from the best American urban planners. It was Doug Suisman, 50, who was chosen. This architect, whose firm is based in San Diego, California, had no special experience with the Middle East. He was only in Israel one time, in 1972 as a tourist. On the other hand, he drew up the plan for Lower Manhattan in New York and the Civic Center in Los Angeles. “”We chose him because he was the most enthusiastic,” Steven Simon explained. “His naivety,

or rather his ‘freshness’, was a great asset. People who know the region too well are pessimistic and they limit themselves.”

Doug Suisman soon went to work. In two months he defined the basics of his project, which he calls the “formal structure”: “In addition to its borders, each Nation-State has its shape which depends on its landscape, its history, and its cities.” It was a work of pure imagination that he did not check onsite until after the fact. “Usually people prefer to work in the field rather than on documents. But there, the complexity is such that it was an advantage.” By superimposing maps (population, rainfall, cultures, roads, etc.), he noticed that the principal cities of the West Bank, with the exceptions of Qalqiliya, Tulkarem and Jericho, were organized along a north-south arc turned toward the west. The cities, the cultures, everything turned toward the plain and the sea, principally because the rains fall on the western side of the crest line that runs through the West Bank from north to south. And also because it is from there that the refugees came, chased from the coastal plain in 1948. There remained the problem of Gaza, separated from the West Bank by Israel. It was there that he had his Eureka moment: all that was needed was to extend the arc to the south to link the two territories. “We have worked to make the future Palestinian state more autonomous.”

“An urban fabric full of hope”

From a concept, the Arc became a high speed railway line. Suisman decided to have an aqueduct, a highway, a pipeline, and a fiber optic network, even windmills, follow the route of the railway - a true backbone surrounded by a greenbelt to preserve the environment. The idea of the high speed train came to him when he thought of his regular stays in France: “The high speed train has not only changed the geography, but the French psychology. However, it’s just a train. We can’t forget that all of that is no bigger than the San Francisco Bay! To travel the 110 kilometers that separate Jenin from Hebron in less than an hour,” as Doug Suisman explains, “is to bring the Palestinians into the modern world.”

From April to August 2004, Doug Suisman stayed in the Palestinian territories three times. In Gaza, the shock was less harsh than expected: “I expected to see Calcutta and Gaza made me think of Mexico City, a very dynamic urban fabric, full of hope.”

“Tears in his eyes”

At the end of 2004, the project was planned out, written up, mapped, and quantified. The report is embellished with virtual 3D images of the train stations and the boulevards connecting them to the historic downtowns, located more than 10 kilometers from the centers to avoid any congestion. The construction of the Arc will cost about 5 billion euros and should employ 10,000 to 160,000 Palestinians per year for five years.

Since the beginning of 2005, Rand has initiated a series of presentations of its report: to the White House, the US State Department, the European Union, advisors to Tony Blair, the World Bank, the World Economic Forum. “Each time we get a very positive reception,” remarks Steven Simon. The Palestinian government was the first to be informed, at the end of February 2005. “When the lights came back on,” recalls Doug Suisman, “Jihad al-Wazir, Deputy Minister of Finance, got up with tears in his eyes to say: “This project has the beauty and simplicity that we need.” I felt an immense relief.”

During a closed-door meeting, the negotiators for the PLO pointed out that the project says nothing about the Israeli colonies, which, furthermore, the path of the Arc carefully avoids, and that they are concerned about the frailty of the infrastructures along the green line, fearing that this “void” could incite Israel to annex portions of the Palestinian territory. “I tried to lay out the project in the most logical and functional way. That’s why I did not take the colonies into account. All I can say is that the more territorial continuity there is, the better the chances of success for the future Palestine. It’s a question of economic rationality.” Steven Simon elaborates: “It is not up to us to say what the future peace accord must look like. But the parties present must know what will or will not work. We are not diplomats, but experts [in urban planning].” “Be careful,” adds Suisman, “the Arc is a concept, not a plan to follow to the letter.”

“A fairy tale for adults”

On the Israeli side, the project got a more moderate reception. The Haaretz editorial writer, Meron Benvenisti, nevertheless considered to be left wing, sees in the project, “a fairy tale for adults.” “The Israelis explained that, for them, it is security that takes precedence,” sums up Steven Simon. “We responded to them that the more the Palestinian state is connected to the outside and the more it prospers internally, and therefore the more viable it is, the less of a threat it will be, which they agreed with.” In September, Rand is going to resume its lobbying of the members of the quartet (the UN, the United States, the EU, and Russia), guarantors of the “waybill.” The World Bank and the Palestinian Planning Ministry would like to take advantage of the imminent Israeli withdrawal from Gaza to implement some of the projects related to the Arc, such as the reopening of the airport and the construction of a port. Today, Doug Suisman knows the Middle East better. He still remains just as optimistic with regard to the feasibility of his project, but less so with regard to the ability of the parties in this conflict to “overcome their emotions and their rancor.”

By Christophe Ayad

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(1) Available at www.rand.org

<http://www.liberation.fr/page.php?Article=310346>