

Running the Divide

Mick Dumper

Running and divided cities are not an obvious mix. However, during the course of research for a project on divided cities I have had the chance to run round and through the cities of Belfast, Brussels, Mostar, Nicosia, Beirut, and both Israeli West Jerusalem and occupied Palestinian East Jerusalem.¹ I tend to run early in the morning and it is remarkable what a different kind of city you see at that time of the day from the one you encounter later on. In the early morning the city is one of cleaners and garbage collectors, noisily loading trucks and emptying dustbins, sweeping piles of litter into even bigger mounds. They are focussed on the job and indifferent to a runner in shorts dodging between them. It is also a city of laborers and the working class. Professionals and schoolchildren both seem to rise later, and particularly during that period just after dawn but before the shops, offices, and schools open, you see the raw face of the city, its informal economy. This is an aspect which fades into the background later in the day, amidst the hubbub of the city at full-throttle with its busy private cars and taxis shooting past, stirring up dust and confining pedestrians to the pavements. Before this, roughly clad men (it is mostly men) spill out of dirty, battered buses, move quietly across empty streets clutching their lunch in plastic bags. Some group together in clusters at street corners, waiting for small vans and pick-up trucks to come by, and tense negotiations over a day-rate are conducted with the driver. In East Jerusalem you can see Palestinian laborers, tired from their journey into the city, before the day has even started, warily soliciting work at the corner of Prophet's Street and Route 1, just up from Damascus Gate. Also at this time in the morning, street vendors appear laden with small-farm produce or second-hand clothing and goods and discreetly pick a key spot beside a shady shop or road junction. You can often



Mostar, view of the hillside cross as viewed from the city center. *Source:* Conflict in Cities.

tell who is “up” and who is “down” in a city by the sellers of second-hand shoes. It is usually the new immigrants who are still struggling to get onto the first rung of regular employment and who have resorted to scavenging dustbins and rubbish skips to re-sell worn and discarded footwear – poor Russians in Jerusalem, North Africans in Greek Cypriot Nicosia, and Egyptians or Yemenis in Beirut.

So far these scenarios play out in most cities. What of occupied or divided cities? What similarities or differences have I noted on my early morning runs between divided or occupied cities and other cities? In the first place, while divided or occupied cities are generally much tenser than other cities most of the time, in the early morning this is not always the case. In fact, divided or occupied cities also have a different feel to them at dawn than later in the day; tensions emerge much more as the morning passes. In the early morning there are often fewer soldiers and border police in evidence, and the ones that are in view are more relaxed and calmer. The reason for this is partly the fact that fewer people and vehicles on the streets pose less of a security threat – there are so many less variables to deal with – so that the soldiers at checkpoints or in their stationary armoured personnel carriers can drink coffee or smoke a cigarette while contemplating the scene before them in a relaxed fashion, the safety catches of their weapons in the “On” position. It is also partly a tacit understanding between them and the laborers that for all the political eruptions that take place during the rest of the day, for this initial period and for this particular demographic the important business of getting to work or even getting work is paramount. Later on, with students, schoolchildren, white-collar workers, activists, and the unemployed all awake, the rules of the game change, the threat threshold is much lower. But, for the early morning laborers and checkpoint shift, both sides know that survival for them is too fragile for any other consideration apart from getting to work to be given much credence. The risk of a confrontation is, therefore, less likely. Later in the day, when the number of people on the streets increases and the number of military and police also increases, the potential for confrontation and violence is heightened and the city becomes much more fraught.

Running in divided cities also presents you with other perspectives. One morning in Mostar, I found myself gravitating, surprisingly, upwards along roads which wound gradually round the back of the Croatian half of the city until I realized I was so high I might as well continue up to a vantage point overlooking the city. There I found the huge 30-40 meter crucifix, painted white, which is visible from all parts of the city below. It declaims both a religious and a political message to the non-Christian and non-Croatian residents: this city belongs to “us”! The message has a vicious, nasty edge to it as well: it was from these heights that the Croatian army bombed the Bosniak Muslim and Serbian sections of the city, causing many deaths and extensive displacement. The bombardments also destroyed the Stari Most, the ancient bridge spanning the river which more or less separates the two sectors of the city. As such, the cross acts as a constant symbolic reminder of the potential for genocidal violence which floats, as it were, in the sky above the daily lives of its inhabitants. Later on that day and on subsequent days in Mostar, I found that the cross so subtly intruded into my consciousness that I constantly felt as if I was in a sniper’s crosshairs, and whenever I crossed the street or any open ground

I would automatically glance up at the cross on the hillside and register my exposure.

I very rarely run in Jerusalem. Too often the image of the former U.S. president Jimmy Carter collapsing on the walls of the Old City during a public relations stunt that backfired in the mid-1980s appears before me. It is not just the avoidance of such hubris, however, that makes me think twice about running in Jerusalem. Even in the early mornings, the heat can be punishing and the terrain surprisingly steep and undulating. A run round the walls starting at Damascus Gate can be quite an obstacle race of contrasting pavings, small walls, sloping roads, uneven steps, rocky paths, and finally, if it is summer, a welcome drenching by the sprinklers between Jaffa Gate and New Gate. Yet a run does offer you a rewarding view of a slice of the city which is obscured by the crowds and bustle that come later. Early in the day, the city is at its most peaceful and you are permitted long lingering private looks at some of the most beautiful vistas in the world. The run from the Wall at Abu Dis, through Bethphage and al-Tur, past the shady trees of Augusta Victoria hospital, round Mount Scopus, then down to Sheikh Jarrah and to Damascus Gate is a visual gem that sums up the beauty and the tragedy of division in the city. At the same time, it is also at its most banal, with cleaners and municipal workers preparing the city for the day and you can see how, stripped of its religious and political tensions, it remains at heart a small city that needs to be cleaned and organized.

On these runs in Jerusalem I pass through a number of transitions. Jogging along, you can suddenly be aware of “temperature” changes as you move from one part of the city to another, even from one street corner to the next. There is no obvious visible border being crossed but you sense a transition, an unexpected change in atmosphere and pace. Sometimes, it may be the sudden disappearance of a pavement and when you look around you notice that the rows of apartment blocks and their neat gardens have ended. It then registers that you have moved from an Israeli Jewish area to a Palestinian one and, further along the road, you can see that it becomes pitted and eventually perhaps unpaved, and, unlike the Jewish area, surrounded by houses which are largely unfinished and have lost their regular grid-like arrangement. Sometimes, perhaps, the difference is signalled by the particular kind of bustle on the street, or the dress of the passers-by, or the appearance of bi- and tri-lingual shop signs, or graffiti-like paintings of the Kaaba in Makkah or the Dome of the Rock on front doorways, or the remnants of home-made plastic kites caught kicking in the electric cables overhead. At other times, it might be the different cooking smells wafting out of kitchens, subtle changes in music being played on the radio, or the language of the greetings being called out as neighbours enter each other’s houses. The transitions are not only just between East and West Jerusalem but also within those areas. The absence of women in certain public spaces at certain times is not just a sign of a conservative Palestinian suburb but also perhaps that you are leaving the realm of short skirts and bare arms along Ben Yehudah Street in West Jerusalem and are entering Mea She’arim, an Orthodox Jewish stronghold also in West Jerusalem but as forbidding to outsiders as are parts of Qom, the city of seminaries, in Iran.²

And the transition from “hot” to “cold” is also more accurate an analogy than it first might seem. At times of political friction, the city may be going along with its usual staccato and busy rhythms when, suddenly, you can sense tension in the air. There are

fewer cars, buses have stopped running, the air feels thinner, your running feet more echoey on the street. You register that there is a low growl of chanting in the distance and shopkeepers are standing outside their front doors, keys at the ready to pull down the shutters. A dull thud and a few muffled crumps signal teargas being fired and you hesitate to carry on. Then turning a few streets to your left, you find that the cafe tables on the pavement are crowded with people, schoolchildren are queuing at bus stops, families are peering into shop windows. You could be in a different city altogether. One part of the city seems to be experiencing strife and conflict while other parts carry on with everyday life. When out and about in these circumstances, as a rough indicator of safety, I use what I call “the Dumper pram-quotient”: the more prams in sight, the safer the street. I certainly do not use the presence of police or uniformed security forces as a good indicator; in fact, they are more often than not a sign not to take a run that morning.

On another occasion, in Belfast, I ran across the city from where I was staying near Queen’s University, over the River Lagan into the predominantly Protestant part of East Belfast. Unlike my earlier run in Mostar, this time I had an agenda: I wanted to see both the birthplace of the greatest of all contemporary Irish singers, Van Morrison, and the inspiration of one of his most famous songs, *Cyprus Avenue*. Stopping briefly outside his former home in Hyndford Street, a fairly nondescript terraced house with a motorbike in the small front yard, I made my way to the more middle-class area further up the hill. As I turned into Cyprus Avenue which is a broad shady boulevard-like street with large houses set well back in mature gardens, I stopped to take in the scene, imagining the adolescent world of Van Morrison captured by his song, and catching glimpses of the center of Belfast through the branches of the trees forming an arch over the road. I am sure Van Morrison would never have dreamt that thirty years later, after leaving Belfast, another song of his, *Days Like This*, would become the unofficial anthem of the Northern Irish peace movement and that he would be performing at a concert to celebrate the Anglo-Irish peace agreement in front of a mixed Protestant and Roman Catholic audience and the then president of the U.S., Bill Clinton.³ The peace agreement that has put the deeply fragmented city of Belfast on the road to re-integration is fragile and beset with huge difficulties, not least the growing alienation from it of the working-class Protestant community from which Van Morrison himself came. But it is still holding and the longer it holds, the greater are the chances that it will develop its own momentum. Standing at the top of the avenue looking down on the city and across to the Black Mountain beyond, I could not help but contrast how much longer a road to peace Jerusalem has still to travel before there is anything like a celebratory concert or even a peace anthem. The abyss between the dominant Israeli community and the occupied Palestinian one is still so wide, and the prospects for an agreement based on Palestinian sovereignty being established in East Jerusalem currently appearing so dim, that it will take a lot more than music and negotiations to offer some possibility of a more equal relationship between the two sides in the city.

Looking into the future, what is the runner standing on the brow of the Mount of Olives likely to see? One vision is how the city laid out beneath her or him is a city of many fragments and more than just of two parts, how visible and invisible lines criss-

cross its face creating a myriad of different social, economic and political groupings, and how its streets change from Friday to Saturday to Sunday, from Christmas to Pessah to ‘Eid al-Adha. The runner may also realize that these fragments and changing facades cumulatively reveal a complex political dynamic concerning the future of the city. While the city is being fought over by two ethno-national camps, a simple territorial partition will be very damaging for the whole and also for the two parts which would result. A negotiated agreement will need to reflect its heterogeneous make-up and overlapping histories. I also would imagine that the runner would see how over the past forty-six years since the Israeli occupation of the city, the gold of the Dome of the Rock remains the iconic monument of the city and there is, as yet, no other monument or park or institution which has replaced it. But the runner would also be aware that the dark, brooding presence of the Wall is lining itself up to do so.

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Endnotes

- 1 “Conflict in Cities and the Contested State: Everyday Life and the Possibilities for Transformation in Belfast, Jerusalem, and Other Divided Cities” (RES-060-25-0015), a five-year interdisciplinary and multi-institutional project funded by a large grant awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK). For further details of the research framework and program of the Project, please see the website www.conflictincities.org. This article is a revision of extracts taken from my book: *Jerusalem Unbound: Geography, History and the Future of the Holy City* (New York: Columbia University Press, June 2014).
- 2 Tovi Fenster, *The Global City and the Holy City: Narratives on Knowledge, Planning and Diversity* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2004), 126ff. Fenster, an Israeli academic, describes similar shifts in “comfort” from an anthropological and planning perspective.
- 3 Clinton Heylin, *Can You Feel the Silence? Van Morrison: A New Biography* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003).