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ISRAEL



TEMPORARY INCONVENIENCE: Firefighters put out a fire in a train from Nahariya to Tel Aviv December 28

Trundling

Along

Despite a long railway history, Israel is still waiting for a comprehensive rail system

Lawrence Rifkin

NO ONE WRITES ABOUT trains when they run on time, but the recent announcement on the Israel Railways website, although laconic and opaque, was so good it made the front pages:

Starting on Saturday night, 22 January 11, full operation is being resumed on all the country's railway lines; this has been decided following presentation of the interim findings reached by the team of outside experts to the Israel Railways management. We apologize for the temporary inconvenience.

There was no need to say just what it was that the "outside experts" had been looking into, for there was probably no one in little Israel who by this time hadn't heard about or seen the stunning and dramatic December 28 cell phone footage of the 8:40 from Nahariya, less than an hour into its run to Tel Aviv, going up in flames next to an open field just south of Netanya. The fire left over 100 of the train's passengers injured, either from smoke inhala-

tion or from cuts and broken bones suffered while exiting windows – which in at least one case had to be shot out with a soldier's rifle after the coach's doors failed to open.

"Temporary inconvenience" didn't even begin to describe the subsequent three weeks of severely curtailed (and, in many cases, completely canceled) train services after the government-owned company withdrew all 46 three-car units of the type that caught fire – fully one-third of its fleet. At the same time, the company went ahead with a preplanned program of track and infrastructure maintenance that shut down entire lines, mostly to the south and east of Tel Aviv, something that left commuters' nerves even more frazzled than usual and turned morning drive-time into a morning-long drive.

As for the "outside experts," they blamed the late December fire on maintenance that had been performed in Denmark on the Scandinavian-built IC3, a three-car, self-propelled, diesel-powered unit that's been in ser-

vice in Israel since 1992. Yet an initial investigation by fire marshals indicated that the 8:40 out of Nahariya, and possibly the entire fleet of IC3s, did not meet recently established safety standards for safe evacuations in times of emergency.

RAILWAYS CAME TO THE Middle East at the end of the 19th century, during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire. The first real network consisted of various lines, most of them private German and French initiatives running east from Constantinople toward Baghdad. The idea, at least as far as the Germans were concerned, was to provide a supply line and trade outlet to some of their imperial territories, including holdings in eastern Africa.

The line that went the other way from Constantinople ran to Berlin; as such, the entire route was known in some quarters as the Berlin-Baghdad line. Links continuing westward could take trains all the way to

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Paris, and at various points in time the European segment hosted the fabled Orient Express.

At roughly the same time, the Turks decided to construct a line south to Damascus and, eventually, farther south into what is today Saudi Arabia. The Ottomans wanted not only a strategic route to supply and defend their holdings in the Hejaz, but a line that would ease travel for pilgrims to Mecca (although the railway ended up going only as far as Medina, some 250 miles to the north of Islam's holiest city). The Hejaz railway, as it came to be known, soon included a northern spur that ran west to Haifa, Acre and Nablus, and a southern spur running west toward Beersheba. Eventually, when the Turks entered World War I alongside the Germans, they built a railway line directly from the northern spur to Beersheba and on to Sinai, toward British military and strategic holdings.

Nevertheless, the network was not the Middle East's first railway. That distinction belongs to the Jaffa-Jerusalem line, first proposed in 1839 and spurred along by financier and Jewish philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore, who had been duly impressed by rail services then being introduced in Britain. But dreams often take time, and it wasn't until 1892, after a French firm undertook the initiative, that the first locomotive entered the holy city – a speedy three hours and 50 minutes after setting out from the sleepy Mediterranean port some 55 track-miles away.

After pushing the Turks out in 1917, the British, settling in for what they expected to be a long haul under the terms of the Mandate for Palestine, made extensive additions and improvements to existing railway lines, especially those running from Haifa southwest to Kantara, on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, via Lydda, today called Lod. But they pulled out barely three decades later, and the sovereign Jewish government that arose in Israel, which was faced with too many invaders, too many immigrants and not enough capital, allowed the system to fall into a deep decline.

"It takes a long time to build rail infrastructure, and much effort to maintain it, but it's a myth that the Middle East was not built for railroads," says Prof. Yehuda Hayuth, an expert on mass transit strategies and a former president of the University of Haifa. Today he is a senior fellow at the **S. Neaman Institute**, a think tank on policy planning that is affiliated

with the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. "The Ottomans realized the potential, both for passengers and freight. But in the early days of Israel, the idea was to get as much done elsewhere as quickly as possible, especially with immigration."

Aside from the need to build entire neighborhoods and towns to absorb an influx of newcomers, the railways stagnated further due to the power of the country's bus cooperatives, primarily Egged, which took the lion's share of government subsidies and became – by far – the young country's primary mode of mass transportation, being able to penetrate just about every nook and cranny of the state. Aside from routes developed to haul phosphates and other minerals from the Negev in the direction of Ashdod port, by the mid-1950s a once proud and bustling railway network had become a mostly dormant spaghetti string of rusting iron hosting the occasional passenger or freight train that was heading, it seemed, to nowhere.

THIS BEGAN TO CHANGE IN THE early 1990s, when progress on the peace front led to a diversion of government funds away from Jewish settlements and development in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in favor of infrastructure, especially that of roadways, within Israel proper. It became apparent that urban sprawl and the ever-growing number of private vehicles might quickly overrun even new roads in a country whose asphalt is said to be among the most congested in the world.

"Today, there are 2.4 million vehicles, and projections for 2028 show 4 million, meaning we'll have to double the road infrastructure, which is problematic due to a lack of space," Hayuth tells The Report. "There is certainly a great need for an extensive rail system, a mixture of heavy and light. Strategically, this is a must. The faster we act, the better it will be for the country."

In 2003, the railway system was cut loose from the government's Ports and Railways Authority and became Israel Railways, a corporation fully owned by the government and overseen by the Transportation Ministry. In the past decade it became a serious competitor to Egged, primarily in the densely populated coastal corridor running from Haifa south to Tel Aviv and on to Ashkelon.

"We're in a period of 10 years, in which train service in this country has absolutely blossomed," Israel Railways CEO Yitzhak

Harel tells The Report. "We've tripled our passengers. Unfortunately, infrastructure and equipment have not entirely kept up. Until 2009 there was a shortage of money, especially for railway cars. But as of 2010, we have enough and are ordering new cars. In less than a year we'll be doubling our fleet."

But more trains bring problems.

"The minute Israel Railways began receiving larger budgets, things began to really take off," says Doron Balasha, a transportation engineer at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. "In the past decade, they invested a lot, some \$5.5 billion in the past five years alone. Development was first and foremost. But safety appears to have been overlooked."

Indeed, the December train fire outside Netanya was just the latest in a long string of bad headlines emanating from the train system. Most of the previous incidents had centered on railway crossings, where horrendous collisions between speeding trains and cars, buses or trucks stemmed from antiquated or non-existent safety measures, or from Israeli drivers being... well, Israeli drivers.

Many of these collisions took lives, the most recent coming last summer when the driver of a minibus who apparently was traveling too fast failed to stop at a crossing where the lights were flashing and the barrier was already down. Seven minibus passengers, all members of the same family, were killed; they included two children and a pregnant woman. Several dozen of the train passengers were treated for shock.

In other crossing crashes, the dead included train passengers whose railway coaches had derailed following the collisions. The country's worst crossing disaster took place in 1985 when a school bus taking a class to an outing at the beach stalled directly on the tracks at an unprotected crossing south of Haifa. Twenty-two people aboard the bus were killed, 19 of them junior high school students.

By 2006, the intensity and frequency of the collisions had become so bad that the State Comptroller's Office issued a series of scathing reports complaining, among other things, that less than 25 percent of the country's crossings had any type of safety provisions. What's more, indictments were issued against senior members of the railroad's management, which underwent a major shakeup – along with the company's safety culture.

"These accidents alerted management