Creating margins at the centre: Israeli bypass roads in the Palestinian Beit Hanina neighbourhood, East Jerusalem
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Many of this publication’s case studies focus on borderlands that sit at the geographic margins of a country, far from state capitals, and are overlooked in transition processes. Conversely, Jerusalem is a place where the border is very much at the political, economic and cultural centre. As one of the world’s most contested cities, spatial means of control and securitisation are key features of it. Following the mass displacement of Palestinians and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jerusalem was physically divided into Arab-controlled East and Israeli-controlled West under the 1949 Armistice Green Line Agreement. After the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel occupied the eastern part of the city and annexed it to the western part, claiming a one-sided unification. Ever since, there has been no further formal division of the city, nor any physical barriers constructed between the two parts, such that the Green Line became irrelevant. However, the built environment, architecture and infrastructure of the city has played a major role in preserving and extending the 1967 Green Line divisions.

This has transformed East Jerusalem into an urban borderland that is both at the centre and the edge of contested space. The city’s urban fabric and built infrastructure offer key insights into how a border that cuts through a city operates, as well as how it continues to evolve due to the structures that maintain it.

The Palestinian neighbourhood of Beit Hanina in East Jerusalem highlights these particular ‘borderland’ dynamics. The neighbourhood, which is not commonly considered a site of direct conflict and confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians in the city (figure 1), is bordered by three bypass roads with a fourth going directly through it (figure 2). The bypass roads are designed exclusively to connect Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem with one another, with the western part of the city, and with the rest of the country. In Beit Hanina, these roads not only facilitate the mobility of Israelis but also form an urban edge that hinders any Palestinian urban expansion and development of the neighbourhood. An investigation of the spatial relationships between these roads and the rest of the neighbourhood reveals that they are rarely connected with one other. In most cases, a large wall separates Beit Hanina from the bypass roads (see photo), isolating Palestinians while providing a fast and secure space for Israelis to travel without realising that they are near or in a Palestinian community.

In places where these roads do connect with Beit Hanina’s main street, they form large junctions or access points within the neighbourhood (figure 2). These points are larger than other junctions and visually and physically discordant with the neighbourhood’s normal flow of people and life. Hence, these access points open Beit Hanina to Israeli penetration and control. At the same time, Beit Hanina remains enclosed, spatially limited and isolated. While the bypass roads physically connect the eastern and western parts of the city, they also create uneven border relations between populations living on either side, and extend into the eastern part beyond the green line demarcation (figure 1).

The 1967 war transformed the borders of the state into the urban fabric of a living city, shaping the daily lives of people on both sides, and making the isolation of one group and mobility of the other contingent on one another. The bypass roads – and Jerusalem more broadly – illustrate how borderland spaces do not only exist at the periphery of the state, or in relation to...
internationally recognised boundaries. They also show how the built environment and infrastructure are used to control and securitise populations. This presents particular peacebuilding challenges given how different communities are impacted, and highlights the centrality of the city’s status to any conflict resolution, development or statebuilding discussions.

Figure 2: Map of Beit Hanina neighbourhood in East Jerusalem, showing the nearby Israeli settlements and bypass roads that limit its urban expansion and provide key access and control points to the neighbourhood.

Source: Author, adapted from Google Maps.