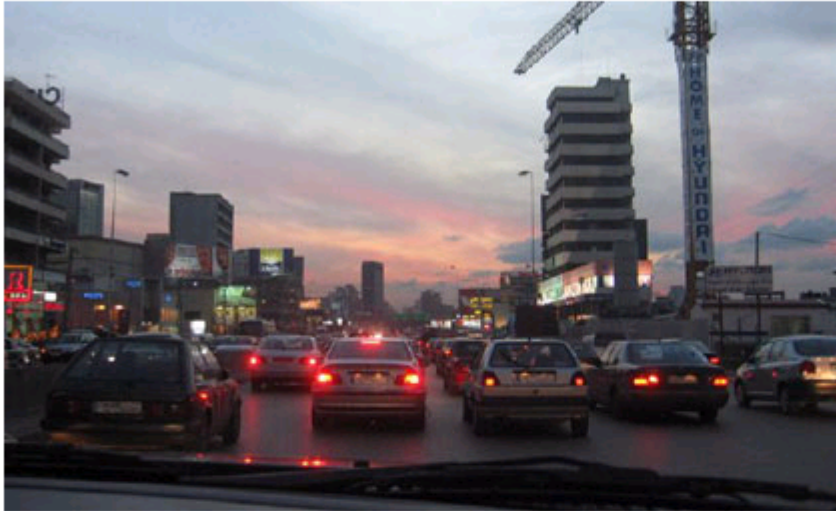


## Public transport for Lebanon?

Talking to Frederic Karam of ELHUB

Paige Kollock



Congestion in downtown Beirut. (Courtesy of ELHUB website)

Beirut's notorious traffic jams are one of the first things visitors notice when they come to town. Gridlock also ranks high on the list of gripes among Lebanon's own citizens. The country's major cities, located along the 200 kilometer Mediterranean coastline, host about 60 percent of Lebanon's inhabitants. With one main highway running parallel to the sea, and an ever expanding fleet of cars, the traffic problem is getting worse by the day.

But the creators of [ELHUB](#) are hoping to change that. They have proposed setting up a maritime transport system that would connect the entire Lebanese coast allowing passengers to travel the length of the country in two and a half hours. Using high-speed ferries, quays and a ticket system, designers say the boatline would drastically reduce commuting times, mitigate traffic snarls, reduce carbon dioxide emissions and create interactions between different religious and social groups.

NOW spoke to one of ELHUB's architects, Frederic Karam, about the maritime public transport idea, and where it stands ten years after its conception.

### **ELHUB was not the first to come up with an idea of mass public transit for Lebanon, was it?**

**Karam:** No, the idea [of public transportation in Lebanon] existed since before the civil war. Back then, they wanted to use hover craft, but then there was a civil war, so the idea of using the whole coast was cancelled.

If you look at the [map](#), you see that the entire world is using [maritime public transport], and also, countries that have the same GDP as Lebanon, like Croatia and Turkey, are using it, so it is feasible. It's not about not having the money.

### **What kind of response have you gotten from the Lebanese people about the project? Graffiti of ELHUB's logo is spray painted on walls and buildings around Beirut, so it is obviously popular.**

**Karam:** A friend told me about the graffiti, so I was kind of amazed. The [Facebook group](#) is very popular. I had a friend who was in a *service* [shared taxi] and the driver was talking about ELHUB... Apparently, the idea is very well accepted by the population. We think [the lack of public transportation] is a real problem in the country. Everything is privatized. Even the beaches are privatized. So it's good to see that this idea

is popular, because this is the goal of it. It should be very mixed use.

**ELHUB believes the idea of public transit can bring Lebanese people together? Why do you think so? Why are public spaces so important?**

**Karam:** A public space is something that you always need. It's an organ for a city. Just like you need shopping and you need housing, you need spaces where people can gather together. Someone who is wearing a mini skirt cannot go to where someone is veiled, and someone who is veiled can't go to where someone is wearing a miniskirt. Since everything is privatized [in Lebanon], you're not confronted with others. Everyone lives in a bubble. The only public spaces are shopping malls. If you want to see who the Lebanese people really are, you have to go to a shopping mall.

**The idea of connecting the main cities by boat is a good one, but how will people access other neighborhoods?**

**Karam:** A hub, by definition, is a locale for all different transportations. The way it would work is you could drive down to the hub, park your car, and either walk or take a *service*. Or you can go inside the boat with your car, but this takes longer, and the boat [that carries cars] is a bit slower. [The hub] will attract the taxis because they know they will find clients there, and it will attract clients because they know they will find taxis there.

**According to your website, "ideas [on] urban issues are rarely taken into consideration by the governing sphere." Why do you think that is?**

**Karam:** There is no urban planning in Lebanon. You don't have strict laws, and the laws that do exist are not respected. In our country, money rules everything. People are ready to sell anything, just to have money at that moment. There is no long-term planning or care for the future. Everybody wants money now because people don't know what will happen tomorrow. In this context, it is impossible to plan, but people will have to start looking forward.

**What's the history of public transit in Lebanon? What about using trains for public transit?**

**Karam:** A train is the best public transit system you could have. At first, we thought maybe we could rebuild the train system in Lebanon. But there are problems with that. First, you need electricity for the train, and you know our issues with electricity. Also, a train needs more investment [than a ferry system]... to maintain the stations, cars, railroad tracks, etc. It needs a lot of maintenance and a lot of money long-term. As you know, we are not good in maintenance in Lebanon. Usually we build something and watch it die.

Also, in Lebanon, we are in a war-like situation. In 2006 [during the war with Israel], 90 roads and 70 bridges were destroyed [by Israeli forces], so adding a railroad is providing a target. You can shoot as much as you want in the sea. If you destroy one boat, ok, we have another boat. With the train, you destroy one station and the train doesn't move anymore.

**How environmentally friendly is ELHUB?**

**Karam:** The boats pollute a lot, they're not eco-friendly by themselves, but they can carry 200 people, so compared to 200 cars, it's less pollution. We are also removing noise and air pollution. It's still better than the current ecological situation, but it's not perfect.

**What about the cost?**

**Karam:** There are two kinds of boats, ones that are \$5 million, others that are \$28 million. But those [prices are for] brand new boats. Some companies are offering [ELHUB] secondhand boats.

■ **So what are the latest developments with ELHUB?**

**Karam:** I met with the Council of Development and Construction. We're still [in the stages of] trying to make ELHUB popular. It's something that will take time.



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