



Beit Fajjar Stone Quarry
Photo: Zuzana Janku

TRADE IN LOCAL MATERIAL BRIDGE BETWEEN PEOPLE



Israeli-West Bank Barrier
Photo: Justin McIntosh

Trade in Local Construction Materials – Bridge between People

Full Essay

“And send me cedar wood, cypress wood, and brazilwood from Lebanon, for I know that your servants know how to cut the trees of Lebanon”

Book of Chronicles II, 2:7

Few would disagree that Middle Eastern reality today is, sadly, characterized by prejudice, ignorance and misperceptions of neighbouring cultures. For many Israelis, nurtured by television news, Iran is nothing but missiles and holocaust deniers. For many Iranians, Israel must seem only as an aggressive illegitimate country prosecuting innocent refugees. This reality is perpetuated by the construction of the 6 meter (18 feet) high concrete barrier between Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Asking any traveler or businessman about his personal encounters with foreign cultures, the answer will mostly include tales of commercial exchange – probably in collaborative work, receiving or giving service; in one word – trade. In this way people are exposed to new thoughts, learn about each other and make friendly connections, proving that all that is required to bring people together is communication.

Construction and masonry are timeless activities happening everywhere, an international language transcending physical or cultural boundaries. Israel and its neighbours don't have many channels of communication as a result of different languages, religions, regimes and history, not to mention armed conflicts creating political and mental rifts. Perhaps some hope could be found in a channel communicating two universal languages at the same time – material and money.

Israeli Material Consumption Trends

Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, several waves of immigrants flocked to the country. In its first years, the young country's need to find housing for millions of people, resulted in mass construction of 3 to 8 story concrete-block buildings considered very efficient but not related to any architectural tradition or local influence and hardly showing aesthetic thought. The ability to think about the significance and benefit of using local

materials, as well as the affordability of other material except for concrete hasn't emerged until the 1980's and 1990's. From slum areas in rural towns to upper-range neighborhoods in northern Tel Aviv, these buildings somewhat inspired by Le Corbusier's designs are extremely widespread and lately enjoy face-lifting and individualization through fresh paint, larger windows and stylish floors.

Differently from the past, in modern Israel the choice of materials for new construction or refurbishment is based on different considerations. A stronger economy, endless variety of choices, high exposure to globalization and the need to feel special are some of many new influences on clients, architects and contractors. Higher quality of life creates demand for higher quality material that looks good and lasts longer, with more and more Israelis being able to afford it.

For example wood, not available locally, has seen a growth of 10%-15% in import every year since 2004, mostly from Europe and China. Lebanese Cedar wood is a superb material many Israeli architects and builders can only dream about obtaining for their projects. It is processed and exported in central Lebanon, less than 400 km (250 Miles) from Jerusalem.

Local Construction Material

Construction based on local materials has its aesthetic value, as well a historical and cultural impact. Inuit snow Igloos, bamboo bridges hanging above tropical rivers and sandstone castles surviving for centuries in the desert are just few examples of how the habitat provides us with necessary material. Today, we marvel at such constructions, because they are simply right. Apart from aesthetic and economical benefits of using local material, it also helps environmental sustainability, saving transportation resources for large amounts of materials from remote origins.

Israel and its neighbours, especially Jordan, Egypt and Saudi-Arabia dwell on lands poor in natural resources like wood and ore. Stone, on the other hand, is widely available in the region, mostly in mountain areas. Both for Jews and Muslims, stone is not only a substance, but represents an important component of the culture. In Jewish tradition, 'The Foundation Stone' at the core of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, is believed to be the rock upon which the world was founded. The same rock, according to Muslim tradition, is where Mohammed ascended to Heaven. Muslims believe that during his travels, Abraham put the foundations to another building placing a rock in its base – 'The Black Stone' at the eastern corner of the Kaaba of Mecca, drawing millions of pilgrims every year.

Ancient ruins dating back from Biblical times to Antiquity are evidence of the traditional use of local stone by local inhabitants. The part dolomitic limestone known as 'Jerusalem Stone' is the main substance of the mountains of Samaria and around Jerusalem, located to the west of the Jordan River, from Jazreel valley in the north, and to the Judean desert in the south. According to Jerusalem municipal law legislated in 1918, during the British Mandate, all buildings must be built or at least externally covered with Jerusalem stone, to preserve the authenticity and traditional appearance of the city.

Some of the stone is brought from Israeli areas west of Jerusalem, but Palestinian quarries in the West Bank have been the main source for Jerusalem stone used in Israel for many years. Bir-Zeit, Beit Fajjar and Yata are the largest quarries in the West Bank, and communities depending on stone industry are located in their vicinity. In the year 2000 the Second 'Intifada', an armed Palestinian uprising, erupted, prompting Israel to a series of steps aimed at one-sided separation from Palestinian territories. Since then, entrance of Palestinians and their goods into Israel is very limited, and movement of Palestinians within the West Bank is subjected to army barriers and checkpoints. As a result, flow of commodities and employment in Palestinian areas shrunk significantly.

Beit-Fajjar, a town 30 km (20 Miles) southeast of Jerusalem has become in the last 70 years one of the major providers of Jerusalem stone. The long tradition of stone cutting goes back to the earliest days of the town, and according to its inhabitants the stone will never run out. Today most of the work is done by machines, but some of the stonemasonry is still done by hand, the pride of the village being the 'Taliani stone' - thin layered limestone with a red shade, extracted and cut by hand for use in floors and external walls.

Eyad, a local mathematics teacher educated in Jordan, has spend the last 10 years working with a chisel and hammer in addition to his teaching job, smoothing rocks in a method that has passed on from generation to generation. He personally knows several Israelis and "some of them are very good men", he says. But they hardly come anymore. They're not allowed in.

According to Ahmed Thawabteh, mayor of Beit Fajjar, Nine years ago, 4,000 out of the town's 15,000 inhabitants worked for the local stone industry, some in the quarries and most in about 150 workshops scattered around the town. Today, less than 1,000 people work for the industry, in 80 workshops, while the rest are shut down. One of the major reasons for this is a limit of entry at the Israeli checkpoints. At one of the checkpoints to Jerusalem, the first 50 trucks with goods can enter, while the rest have to wait for another day.

Regional Material Trade

Regional trade channels were common in the past, when materials for construction were exchanged between kingdoms of the Middle Eastern area, more than 2,500 years ago. King Solomon had built the first Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem using resources from around the region. Materials like wood and precious stones were not available in the small kingdom of Israel, but could be extracted and processed in Lebanon or Ethiopia. Solomon, who ruled in 10th century BC, as well as his followers who built the Second Temple in 6th century BC, realized the political benefit of trading with neighbouring nations, while enjoying quality materials for their temple.

Israel and its neighbours are engaged in several joint projects in different business sectors, however, the scope of cooperation lies far behind that of neighboring countries in the world unaffected by conflict. Some examples of regional cooperation are Israeli and Jordanian renewable energy projects, Israeli and Egyptian agriculture development and a recently established Israeli-Palestinian high-tech start-up company, aimed at sharing some of Israel's success in the field with Palestinian IT developers.

Israel and Turkey, unlike other countries in the area, enjoy healthy trade relations, for the benefit of businesses on both sides and as a result, helping the stability in the political arena. Turkey is the third largest market for Israeli metal and wood industries, with \$200 million worth of commodities in 2007, according to the Israeli Export and International Cooperation Institute.

But in their closer vicinity, Israeli material suppliers who used to purchase marble from Palestinian quarries find themselves unable to trust arrival of goods on time due to the harsh security and blockades on routes from the West Bank into Israel. Who could blame a local agency for switching to suppliers from the Far East, after losing a major client due to a 3 week halt in a project, caused by a delay in material shipment?

An interesting case study for healthy and sustainable regional trade is the textile industry, which succeeds to create fertile regional relations for the benefit of all parties involved. Free trade agreements, formulated with the US government were signed between Israel and Jordan several years ago, resulting among other things in the establishment of an Israeli-owned apparel factory employing 2,500 Jordanian workers. The garments are sold in Europe and the US, but also in Egypt, with a quarter of all goods exported from Israel to Egypt being textiles. 15 years ago, no one would imagine an Israeli company hiring Jordanian employees from Irbid to manufacture goods sold in Cairo, 500 KM (310 Miles) away.

How can the experience shown in this case study be taken into the construction industry, allowing the Middle Eastern builders the opportunity to choose from a wide variety of local materials for their projects?

Israel's export and import data shows foreign trade as it happens today is neither helpful for regional relations, nor promoting sustainability, as shown in the examples below. Official trade is taking place only with countries Israel has diplomatic relations with, thus among regional countries, only Egypt and Jordan are listed. Data about trade between Israel and Palestinians was unavailable. The information below is obtained with the courtesy of Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, updated to 2007.

- Stone, cement and sand exported from Israel to Holland was worth \$24 million, with Italy, France and Turkey coming next with \$6-9 million each. The export to Jordan in the same category stood at \$7,000 only.
- Some of Egypt's main export items are stones, marble and sand. Still, Egypt is located in the 17th place in the list of import origins of such materials to Israel.
- Glass for construction is being exported from Israel in volumes 4 times higher than the import of such glass. Greece, Cyprus and Turkey are countries in the region importing Israeli glass worth \$4-9 million for each country every year. Bilateral glass trade with both Jordan and Egypt summed up to only \$265,000.

Regarding the history of Middle Eastern diplomacy, it is clear that in order to create real progress in regional trade, involvement of international parties would be required. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership holding an annual meeting with high rank diplomats and business executives could be a fertile environment to push material trade initiatives forward. The US Trade Office, as a major player in the promotion of Israeli and Jordanian trade agreements, could also provide important aid.

Promoting trade agreements or treaties between Israel and its neighbours based on the joint exploitation of natural resources for construction could spur personal and business relations on both sides of the border. Integration of local materials in construction contributes to regional economies, environmental sustainability, and architectural integrity in addition to creation of personal relations between the people involved. Such traditions which prevailed in the area in Biblical times and presently exist on a minor scope, should be publically supported by governments and international organizations.

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During the research for this essay, joined by a foreign-looking female friend, we set out in a rented car to Beit Fajjar, risking an arrest and \$1,500 fine for disobeying a military order prohibiting Israelis from going into Palestinian areas (Zone A). Recollecting horrific images of 2 Israelis who entered Ramallah by mistake in 2000 and were lynched by Palestinians made me realize we were also putting our safety at risk. This was the second time I set foot in what will sooner or later be the state of Palestine. The first time was in March 2008, visiting relatives who just lost their 18 year old son, Jonathan Yitzhak Eldar, murdered by a Palestinian terrorist who burst into his school and killed 8 teenagers. His family lives in a Jewish settlement in Samaria.

Inside Beit Fajjar, there was no question about the need to hide our identities. I introduced myself as a British correspondent and my friend was the photographer. I was amazed by the hospitality of the people, the first Palestinians I talk to in my life. Their daily life, so harshly influenced by what Israel calls its security needs and Palestinians call brutal occupation, is unimaginable to a person living in a free democratic country.

Abdullah, a 20 year old Islam religion student who guided us for 5 hours, with his broken English, left me with an unforgettable experience of magnificent human warmth, and feeling ashamed for having lied about who I am. However, it is clear that I couldn't have acted differently. The only Israelis Abdullah met, as far as he knows, are soldiers in 3 different checkpoints he goes through on his way to university in Hebron, delaying him for up to 4 hours every other day. What struck me was the absence of hate towards Israel in their stories, and the overpowering helplessness under which they live.

We headed back to Jerusalem, the dream destination for a 14 year old Palestinian girl we talked to earlier, who vividly remembers her last visit when she was 4. Insha'Allah (Arabic for "God Willing"), soon you could go, I told her. She shook my hand. How sad is a place where policy, propaganda and interests unknown to me prevent me from keeping in touch with a person whom I met and found interesting and charming. Such thoughts ran in my mind upon reaching the international airport to return the rented car, when the security guard nodded after a brief look at my face, and immediately let me through the checkpoint into one of the most secured places in Israel.

The eyes of Avital Eldar, my relative Jonathan's mom, after his funeral, and Eyad, the humble math teacher and stone cutter from Beit Fajjar, both said the same thing - There is no hope.

I want to believe they are wrong.

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