

## **Marathons in Divided Cities: Comparing Jerusalem with Belfast and Beirut<sup>1</sup>**

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At the first in this series of conferences on shared living in mixed cities, held in November 2012 in Jerusalem, Dr Uki Maroshek-Klarman made the interesting remark that mixed cities may present “local solutions to such problems that could potentially be applied on a national level”. This is a fruitful way to look at the organization of marathons in politically divided cities. In contrast to Olympic Games, for instance, a city marathon is a local event, not a national one, even when it takes place in a major city or a capital. The New York and Berlin marathons make headline news worldwide, but across the globe they are still known and valued as local events. In the eyes of the public, marathon routes are indissolubly linked to a particular city landscape. And this is even more true of city marathons in divided cities, such as Belfast, Beirut or Jerusalem. In these three cases, the city environment has been marked by a history of violent disputes about the boundaries between neighborhoods and communities. The marathon routes have to cross these boundaries, and do so peacefully, without creating new kinds of disputes. The boundaries themselves may be considered local, but crossing them has a more global (one could also say national) significance, testifying to the global relevance of the organizational principles on which marathons in divided cities are based.

The principle of inclusiveness is very much at the heart of the marathon as a sport. In the case of a city marathon, we are dealing not with a contest between a few elite athletes, or small teams, as is the case with most sports represented at the Olympics, but with mass events potentially involving thousands of active participants, who in turn receive support from an even larger public. City marathons are generally organized in such a way that participants do not necessarily have to run the full 42 km but have other options at their disposal: these include competitions over shorter distances, such as half marathons, relay marathons, runs for athletes with disabilities and runs for small children.

One may wonder how this principle of inclusiveness is applied to marathons in divided cities – in particular, how it is applied in divided cities where the internal territorial boundaries are disputed, and, within this category of cities with disputed territorial boundaries, in cities with a long history of violence. This last type of dispute is characteristic of Jerusalem, Belfast and Beirut. We will now see if and how the principle of inclusiveness – a key principle in the organization of city marathons – has been applied in each of these cases.

The first marathon in Belfast took place in 1982, during the period of the Troubles, when the armed conflict between paramilitary groups from the two communities – which also involved the British military – was at its height. At the time, because of the threat of terrorism and other forms of political violence, it was extremely difficult to organize any kind of major sporting event in Northern Ireland. The Belfast marathon, however, proved to be a resounding success. Having participants from both Belfast communities running through the two neighborhoods did not appear to be a major problem. They took part without fear, against the contrasting backdrop of everyday violence in the city. Some participants even said that it was

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation is based on my article ‘The Organisation of Marathons in Divided Cities: Brussels, Belfast, Beirut and Jerusalem’, published in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 29, No. 11, August 2012, pp. 1553-1576.

the first time in a long while that they had dared to enter into the other community's territory. And the marathon went on to be a lasting success. The organizers were always careful to ensure that the dividing lines within the city were not projected onto the marathon route, and they managed to achieve the same successful outcome for more than thirty years.

The body responsible for organizing the marathon consists mainly of Belfast City Council and the Northern Ireland Athletics Federation. This close cooperation between a sports organization and the city authorities has facilitated the clearing of roads and helped ensure public safety. It is important to mention in this context that – even when it had a Unionist majority – Belfast City Council is an elected institution that is in principle representative of all citizens. And that the elections for representative institutions in the United Kingdom were not boycotted by those political forces, such as the Sinn Féin party or IRA members, who regarded these institutions as illegitimate and discriminatory and claimed that Northern Ireland was an occupied territory. It is also important to note that the organizers avoided linking the marathon with national symbols or with a particular interpretation of the history of Northern Ireland.

The Beirut marathon has been organized year after year since 2003 without major incident. In contrast to Belfast it is organized by a sports NGO, the Beirut Marathon Association (BMA). The initiative for it came from a former athlete, May El Khalil, whose career had been cut short by an accident. The organizers in Beirut had to overcome a very different type of political division from the one in Belfast. Beirut has been rebuilt since the end of the civil war and, as a consequence, substantial changes have taken place in the demographic composition of the neighborhoods – without, however, overcoming the deep divisions between the various parties and sects that control different parts of the city. Nevertheless, it did prove possible for the BMA to design a marathon route that crossed all these boundaries, despite the city's segregation and the political crises that are liable to turn violent at any moment. Even the military invasion of Lebanon by Israeli forces in 2006 did not prevent the marathon from being held that year. The BMA negotiates the route's safe passage through the neighborhoods with the local authorities, and receives active support from them. Moreover, as the state authorities are also involved, the marathon needs to be secured through a military and police presence. But the organizers' non-partisan approach has saved the event from being unduly dependent on particular political interests.

The fact that the division of Lebanon and its capital city is not linked to any secessionist claim facilitates the organization of a marathon that fosters the revival of the Lebanese nation and the idea of Lebanese unity. Unlike in Belfast, it is possible to have the national anthem played at the start of the marathon. The organizers ask participants to refrain from wearing any symbol, or even color, associated with a particular party or sect: white T-shirts are fine, but green and other colors may be seen as unduly partisan.

The Beirut marathon organizers link their activity to a wide variety of values. The first of their objectives is to introduce jogging as part of a healthy, normal lifestyle for a population that has been concerned for so many years with security issues. Second, they want to make running not only acceptable but even popular among women. Third, the marathon aims to put Beirut on the international marathon map, to counter the view of the city as crisis-ridden and prone to violence. This is in line with the fourth objective, which is to foster national reconciliation throughout Lebanon. For example, the BMA also organizes races in Tripoli, a city in the north of the country that some of the participants had to leave during the civil war. For them, the race constituted the first opportunity to return to their native city.

The Jerusalem marathon is a much more recent event, with the first race being held in March 2011. Unlike with the Belfast and Beirut marathons, the territorial dispute over the status of Jerusalem was projected onto the marathon route right from the outset, even before the starter's pistol was fired. What reasons could there be for the difference between this and the two previous cases?

All three marathons were successful in reaching their aims, but whereas the Belfast and Beirut organizers made a considerable effort to include the whole population of their cities, this was not the case with Jerusalem. In contrast to Belfast and Beirut, the main aim of the Jerusalem marathon has not been to be inclusive, but rather to attract international attention to the city. These different aims are reflected in their style of organization. The Beirut marathon is organized by a non-partisan sports NGO which reaches out to all the city's communities. The Belfast one was set up by Belfast City Council – a representative body for the whole city – in cooperation with sports organizations. The Jerusalem marathon, by contrast, is organized, under the leadership of mayor Nir Barkat, by a city council that represents only one section of the city's population. This is due to the boycott of local elections by the Palestinian community, in protest against the occupation of East Jerusalem.

It is very unusual for a city marathon to be organized exclusively by the local authorities, without any involvement by other organizations: most are organized jointly with sports organizations, or even exclusively by specialized firms. In the case of Jerusalem, however, the city council and its mayor were reluctant to let others organize or co-organize the event. They wanted to invest heavily in the international visibility of the marathon – a political aim that goes far beyond the usual objectives of a commercial company. The participation of a large number of marathon fairs, or inviting dozens of sports journalists, would not necessarily be economically profitable, while what Jerusalem's mayor wanted at all costs was to make the city visible on the international marathon map.

The whole event, moreover, has been viewed as a PR opportunity for the mayor himself. Since its inception, the website of the Jerusalem marathon has given a prominent place to Nir Barkat. The November 2013 website features an introduction by him, and the first image one sees on it is a picture not of the winners of the previous year's marathon, but of the mayor. In contrast to other political leaders who feel a strong urge to prove to the public that they are physically fit – such as Vladimir Putin, Nicolas Sarkozy and Silvio Berlusconi – Nir Barkat can be said to be the only one who has managed to turn this urge into a lasting institution.

Furthermore, having exclusive control of the organization of the marathon allows the city authorities to give prominence to their own view of the city's political history. Participation in the Belfast or Beirut marathons does not imply agreement with any particular narrative of the dispute dividing the city. National symbols are only displayed on the marathon route if they are considered consensual. The Lebanese anthem, for instance, is played at the start of the Beirut marathon, but this national symbol is not disputed by any Lebanese parties or sects. No such consensus is found in Belfast, where no national anthem is played at the start of the race. And it would be inconceivable that the Belfast or Beirut marathons could take place if their organizers linked the running route to a particular interpretation of the city's history of political violence. The Jerusalem marathon, meanwhile, reflects a totally different approach. Its November 2013 website gives a very clear interpretation of the violent disputes dividing the city, saying, for example "The marathon courses were especially selected to recount Jerusalem's 3000-year historical narrative since the beginning of its existence". This means that one particular interpretation of the city's dividing lines is projected directly onto the marathon route. The same website also states that the 1967 war leading to the unification of

Jerusalem is to be regarded as the liberation of the eastern part of the city. The state values and the state symbols of Israel are also prominently represented. In line with the secular views of the majority of the city council no religious buildings or symbols are included in this narrative.

The marathon website makes no mention whatsoever of the need for support and participation from the Palestinian neighborhoods or population in East Jerusalem. The whole focus is on the state values of Israel as a Jewish state. Public health and the need to include disabled citizens in social activities are also present. One of the very few references to the existence of a Palestinian population in Jerusalem to be found on the November 2013 marathon website is the description of East Jerusalem as the home of “former Jordanian residents”. There is another in the following description of Jerusalem’s diverse population: “The city center is an example of Jerusalem’s famous multicultural life. Every day, people of every kind and community visit the area, from bearded yeshiva students to Arabs in keffiyehs and laughing young women in miniskirts”. The organizers see no need to indicate how the various communities living along the marathon route could participate actively or be otherwise supportive of the marathon. Instead, it highlights the existence of a multicultural life in the city as a tourist attraction.

A key factor adding to the perception of the marathon as being divisive is the pro-settlement policy of the ruling majority in the city, and its opposition to the view of East Jerusalem as the future capital of a Palestinian state. Their vision of Jerusalem, which finds concrete expression in the organization of the marathon, is based on the inalienable character of the city’s political unity as the capital of a Jewish state.

The organization of the marathon has been resisted from the very start, initially from within the city council by Meretz, the left-wing Israeli party, which considered that crossing the border into East Jerusalem ran counter to a peaceful and negotiated solution to the conflict. The race was also opposed by the Palestinian authorities, Hamas and the Muslim religious bodies in Jerusalem. All have appealed for a boycott of the marathon, Meretz calling for it to be rerouted within the pre-1967 municipal boundaries.

It is striking that the mayor and city council have responded to this criticism by claiming that their opponents were politically motivated whereas the marathon itself, they argued, was non-political. This is indeed remarkable, as all the values reflected in it, from those of the Israeli state to the key values of public health and the integration of disabled citizens, are in fact deeply political.

Critics of the marathon have argued that East Jerusalem should be considered an occupied territory, and that in principle a marathon route should therefore refrain from crossing its borders. But a comparison with Belfast shows that the problem may lie elsewhere. When the Belfast marathon was organized for the first time, in 1982, a substantial part of the Catholic community regarded the whole territory of Northern Ireland as being occupied. This perception did not prevent the participation of Catholic athletes. Even in the case of an occupied territory, the kinds of values reflected by sporting events are crucial. If sports activities take place on the basis of inclusiveness, they may be helpful in creating more favorable conditions for overcoming the occupied status of a territory. In the case of the Jerusalem marathon, this would require the route to be detached from one particular political narrative of the city’s conflict. Nor is there any need for the organization of the marathon to be under the exclusive control of the city authorities: sports organizations and NGOs are perfectly capable of doing the job. They undoubtedly need the active support of the city council, but the latter do not need to take overall control, as is proven by hundreds of city

marathons elsewhere, and such an alternative approach may help to foster a non-partisan basis for the event.

It is probable that Mayor Barkat is not much interested in inclusiveness. The marathon works perfectly well for his personal PR and as an expression of his coalition's political views on the past and future of Jerusalem. But it is simply wrong to go against the potential of a city marathon to create inclusiveness. The number of participants in the Jerusalem marathon has been growing since 2011, despite the lack of consensual support among the communities living in the city. This suggests that, including with support from abroad, the number of participants and supporters may increase dramatically once its organization, in line with marathons the world over, becomes inclusive.