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2011 Franchise Proposal by
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Franchise location: Amman, Jordan

We Have Woven the Motherlands with Nets of Iron

At the turn of the 20th century, the Hejaz, a narrow-gauge railway built south from Damascus to transport pilgrims to Mecca during the Hajj, represented a tangible, if utopic, dream of a united Middle East. Part divine aspiration, part vehicle for political gain, the train was designed to connect Istanbul through present-day Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia to the holiest cities of Islam. A decade later, the British, eager to replace the Ottoman Empire with its own, initiated what would become decades of European battles in the region. The dream was obliterated: Lawrence of Arabia and a Bedouin army blew the railway apart during WWI. It never recovered but the tracks still remain. After the rise and fall of empires, what is left of the withered dream to transcend physical and metaphysical borders? Having endured wars and conquests, the trains persist, limping along, rented out to nostalgic tourists and enthusiasts. A modern light rail system threatens to replace the historic Hejaz as urban Amman sprawls eastward into the desert. Trains, like Arab unity itself, have a romantic geography: nearly obsolete, valued for historical symbolism, begging to be updated or made once again relevant. We propose to revisit this older way of moving through the Jordanian landscape, to restage the dream of regional cohesion, to repopulate the Hejaz with events created by artists from the countries through which the train once ran. We will invite artists from each of the four countries of the Hejaz (Jordan, Saudi, Syria, and Turkey) to produce installations, performances on movable platforms, archival projects using remnants of the rail lines and other projects, all of which will take place on the rails in Jordan.