
Middle East Research and Information Project

The Urbanization of Power and the Struggle for the City

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The Middle East is one of the most urbanized and urbanizing regions in the world. The proliferation of urban megaprojects, skyscrapers, gated communities, retail malls, airports, ports and highways continues unabated. From 2006 to 2016, cement production almost doubled in the region's major cement producing countries, such as Saudi Arabia (from 27 to 61 million tons), Egypt (29 to 55 million) and Turkey (47 to 77 million). [\[1\] \(#1\)](#) The majority of production is aimed at domestic markets. Saudi Arabia from 2008 to 2016 even banned the export of cement to ensure lower domestic prices for the government's large infrastructure projects.

What constitutes an urban area is a highly fraught political, economic and social question. In countries such as Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, the population is officially over 80 percent urban. [\[2\] \(#2\)](#) And in countries like Egypt, where only 43 percent of people officially live in urban areas, the actual urban population is thought to be much higher. Governments try to avoid classifying areas as urban to avoid providing required services such as a courthouse and police station. [\[3\] \(#3\)](#) Indeed, international organizations still struggle to agree on a universal definition of an urban area as they attempt to monitor the rate of urbanization around the world. [\[4\] \(#4\)](#) One of the most commonly used definitions of an urban area is an area with at least 5,000 people and a population density of 300 per square kilometer. But as the UN Statistics Division notes, the density of settlement is not an adequate criterion for defining an urban area. This suggests that what constitutes the urban is as much qualitative as quantitative; it relates to ways of life. [\[5\] \(#5\)](#)

The urban has often been defined in opposition to the rural. But complicating definitions of urban areas is the fact that rural areas are also being urbanized. Changes to rural life in the region include agro-industrial consolidation, land enclosure, migration flows, communication technologies and the construction of infrastructure, all creating new forms of everyday experience that erode any ostensible divide between rural and urban settings. While debates continue about the definition of the urban, it is broadly agreed that we are now in an age of "planetary urbanization." [\[6\] \(#6\)](#) It is in this context that the intricate thing we call the city, an often elusive outcome of urbanization processes, is increasingly recognized as under threat in the Middle East and beyond. The vast intensification of urbanization and its increased importance to how social life is organized and controlled has placed the region's cities under immense strain. The city seems under attack from the very processes that created it.

The most powerful and immediate way that the loss of the city has been expressed, however, is in the context of the destruction of historic urban centers through war. As a number of essays in this issue attest, war and violence have turned vibrant pluralist urban centers with deep historical roots into rubble. Serra Hakyemez details the destruction of neighborhoods in the city of Sur in the Kurdish region of Turkey following urban warfare between Kurdish armed groups and Turkish security forces. Hakyemez writes that the Turkish government's razing of Sur destroyed the multicultural urban fabric and the city as a symbol of liberation. Omar Mohammed, in his interview, describes how the Iraqi city of Mosul has been subjected to urban violence since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, although the violence unleashed by ISIS resulted in the loss of the city entirely. For four thousand years, Mosul was a place of coexistence and life, but that ended with ISIS's destruction of the history and heritage of the city's communities, including Mosul's al-Hadba minaret which had graced the skyline since 1172. Mosul, Mohammed grieves, is no longer a cohesive city.

Although war and violence are strongly associated with the loss of city life, processes of urbanization often intensify rather than abate in these periods. Thomas Abowd traces in these pages the loss of Jerusalem for Palestinians through urban displacement by the contemporary settler-colonial state of Israel. Abowd writes about how displacement of Palestinians from Deir Yassin in 1948 was key to the construction of West Jerusalem just as the planned demolition of Khan Al-Ahmar is setting the stage for the eastward expansion of "Greater Jerusalem." Historically, the destruction of the built environment in the region has been coupled with active construction. During the Lebanese civil war from 1975–1991, the construction sector was one of the few areas of the economy that continued to expand. A World Bank report notes that before the war, in 1974, construction represented \$141 million, an estimated four percent of GDP; by 1988 this had grown to \$328 million, representing ten percent of GDP. [\[7\] \(#7\)](#) The absence of government supervision meant that developers, often associated with militia leaders, were able to exploit land unconstrained by formal legal restrictions. The various militias endeavored to literally construct their respective sectarian enclaves.

Cities can also be formed by those fleeing violence and conflict. Joanne Nucho writes about Bourj Hammoud, which is widely regarded as Beirut's Armenian suburb built by survivors of the Armenian genocide of 1915–1919. But as Nucho details, this community is home to diverse people who often fled violence and conflict elsewhere, including the most recent influx of those displaced from the conflict in Syria.

Meanwhile, in Syria itself urbanization has continued despite, or rather because of, the conflict. Although the vast urban destruction and the exodus of millions of Syrians did result in a slight decline (one percent) in the urbanization rate from 2010–2015, the rate soon recovered. [\[8\] \(#8\)](#) From 2015, the urbanization rate in Syria is thought by international organizations such as the UN and the World Bank to have increased by as much as two percent per year. [\[9\] \(#9\)](#) This increase can be understood through a number of trends that have emerged in the context of the conflict. Thousands of internally displaced persons have moved to urban centers, in particular to Aleppo, Latakia, Tartous and the surroundings of Damascus. War has also led various factions to provide their own basic urban services and build their own infrastructures, such as roads. Furthermore, the Assad regime is actively transforming the county's urban planning laws and using "reconstruction" to create new political and demographic realities that will consolidate its territorial gains. This new legal framework establishes private-public companies to build infrastructure, issue construction permits and manage urban assets. [\[10\] \(#10\)](#)

Indeed, a different kind of loss can emerge in so-called post-conflict contexts and reconstruction phases. As Ehsani and Elling write, postwar reconstruction has not been kind to the cities of Khorramshahr and Abadan in Iran. The poorly implemented reconstruction process in Abadan has, they argue, created a segregated city with poor basic services. This has created a sense of collective rage and abandonment among Abadan's residents, as well as a collective nostalgia for a past modernity.

Reconstruction as a continuity of violence against the urban fabric is all too familiar in the region. In Lebanon the reconstruction that followed the establishment of the Second Lebanese Republic after the official end of the civil war left many mourning the loss of Beirut. For many residents, the city center was lost not to the civil war but to high-end urban development projects. Much of the destruction was due not to active fighting but to “clean up” operations to prepare the area for reconstruction.

In the downtown area known as the Beirut Central District, the urban development corporation Solidere led the post-war reconstruction dominated by luxury real estate and high-end retailers. The new district replaced what for many Lebanese had been an integral part of what made Beirut “the city.” The new district has little connection to everyday practices for most residents or to their understanding of what constitutes Beirut.

Even beyond war and post-war contexts, urban inhabitants throughout the region are suffering from deteriorating access to services and networks. Access to affordable housing has reached crisis levels. Urban traffic congestion is a constant across the region, which has some of the lowest levels of public transport in the world. According to the World Bank, Cairo’s traffic congestion could cost Egypt as much as four percent of GDP annually (\$8 billion per year). [11] (#11) The failure of basic services and infrastructure is leading to social unrest. In 2015, for example, the “You Stink” movement and large-scale protests emerged in response to garbage piling up on the streets of Beirut. From Iran to Morocco, electricity, gas and water infrastructure are not only failing but are becoming more and more unaffordable. Tunisians have revolted not only against higher taxes and bread prices but also against deteriorating infrastructure and increased telecommunication costs. In 2018, Jordanians took to the streets in large numbers to protest, in part, the government decision to raise prices on electricity and gas. Cities across Iraq have also revolted due to the collapse of basic urban services.

Cities versus Urbanization?

The loss of these cities has occurred in contexts in which many of these very same countries’ economies have focused on investments in the built environment, infrastructure and the broader urbanization process. A number of the region’s economies are dominated by the real estate sector. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), according to the Ministry of Economy, in 2016 “real estate activities” and “construction and building” accounted for 17.2 percent of GDP and nearly 50 percent of total fixed-capital formation. The real estate sector, according to the UAE Ministry of Economy, is “the main driver of all sectors” of the economy. [12] (#12) Even outside of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and their easy access to surplus capital generated by oil revenues, real estate dominates many national economies. In Lebanon, for instance, real estate and construction accounted for 17 percent of real GDP between 2004 and 2011, and the real estate sector has accounted for 50 to 70 percent of total gross fixed capital formation since 1997. [13] (#13)

Capitalist urbanization has thrived throughout the region. Koenraad Bogaert details how in Morocco the construction of neoliberal urban megaprojects and large slum upgrading projects created the conditions for the formation of a new capitalist class alongside older neopatrimonial and clientelist practices. The royal family and Moroccan elites who previously had privileged positions in the state solidified their social power by making fortunes through real estate. Urban megaprojects, Bogaert argues, have also facilitated new external political relationships as foreign investors (particularly the French) become significant stakeholders.

Capitalist urbanization is connected not only to economic rents but to broader formations of social and political power. As a number of contributors detail, urbanization has long been a strategy for governments and powerholders to assert and maintain hegemony. Eliana Abu-Hamdi writes how Jordan’s King Hussein sought to use the urban fabric to promote nationalist sentiment and loyalty to the crown by providing subsidized public housing. Whereas Hussein built the satellite city of Abu Nuseir to direct allegiance and political power away from tribal communities, ‘ Abdullah II has turned away from the welfare state in favor of increasing neoliberalization. This move has increased the practice of appropriating state land to sell to private developers, even if many of those projects—such as the Jordan Gate Towers—sit abandoned as a kind of urban ruination.

The contemporary use of the urban fabric to maintain social hegemony has reached ever more farcical, and perhaps even desperate, levels. As part of its “reform” process, for example, Saudi Arabia has turned to urbanization. A core part of the kingdom’s Vision 2030 is centered around solving the housing “crisis” and sets a goal of 60 percent of Saudis owning their own homes. [14] (#14) The royal family, it seems, views housing as a key means to assert its authority. Vision 2030 also announced a series of urban megaprojects, or “giga projects” as they have become known; these include Entertainment City, a development almost the size of Las Vegas that includes a safari park, race track and indoor ski slope; the Jeddah Waterfront, a \$5 billion redevelopment of the corniche to create a new downtown; tourism development in Medina; and NEOM, a new \$500 billion city on the Red Sea. NEOM, which has been promoted with particular vigor internationally, includes a \$10 billion Saudi-financed bridge to connect the city to Egypt. [15] (#15) In Egypt, meanwhile, the Sisi regime is busy constructing a new capital, “New Cairo” 45 kilometers east of Cairo for five million inhabitants. In his interview Yasser Elsheshtawy notes that New Cairo is known as the “new Dubai” and argues that this replication of Gulf-based urbanity is one of the biggest threats to city life in the region. Ursula Lindsey has described New Cairo as articulating a twisted vision of the ideal city, “minutely planned, shiny, ordered, self-contained, and insulated from the population. An anti-Cairo.” [16] (#16) These anti-cities—urban forms that destroy rather than cultivate the delicate social ecologies of cities—are proliferating throughout the region. Abdali can be considered an anti-Amman, Solidere an anti-Beirut, Rawabi an anti-Ramallah, Zenata an anti-Casablanca, the Tunisia Economic City an anti-Tunis and so on.

Urban realities in the twenty-first century are more differentiated and multi-scalar than before. In Lebanon, for instance, municipal and political boundaries interrupt the otherwise continuous urban form to delineate formal cities like Beirut and Jounieh. But these political and administrative designations often have little to do with the urban socio-spatial fabric or the quotidian practices of people who frequent the region. Beirut and Jounieh are established and maintained through practices of people that use, interact with and understand these spaces. They are not stable objects that can be clearly bounded and identified.

Yet the idea of the city as a distinct entity has remained important to how people understand social space and conduct themselves within it. The city is not only a materially and physically bounded thing, but also something that is created and maintained through repetitive practices. The loss of the city, therefore, is not merely the absence of a particular urban form or building but rather the loss of the ability of its inhabitants to shape and partake in the socio-spatial processes of urbanization.

Cities Reclaimed

Protest is perhaps the most effective way that inhabitants can reclaim the lost city, directly participate within it and claim a “right” to it. The edited book *Revolt in New York* [17] (#17) details how protests such as Occupy Wall Street and earlier uprisings of the Munsee against the

Dutch actually produced the city of New York. These protests have been just as vital to shaping the city as formal politics, planning, economic growth and neo-liberal restructuring—the more common understandings of how cities are formed. In this vein, the Arab uprisings, and the myriad other protests that have followed, constitute the most recent manifestation of the engaged production of cities by people throughout the region. As Robert Parks (published as an online companion piece to this issue), Youssef El Chazli and Ayse Çavdar detail in these pages, the city remains a vital place of protest that shapes the contours of the broader nation.,/p>

El Chazli describes how following the 2011 uprising in Egypt a public sphere emerged in Alexandria, with a range of activities and debates blossoming on the streets. New forms of “Alexandrinity” were established and the Alexandrian accent was even rediscovered. Today, El Chazli laments, this energy has largely dissipated from the streets of Alexandria, but the disquiet that produced the Arab uprisings has not. Jordanian protesters in 2018 are not only objecting to the Jordanian government’s attempt to foreclose access to urban services, but also practicing their active claim to cities and city life across the country. At the same time in Iraq thousands have taken to the streets in Najaf, Basra, Maysan, Dhi Qar, Karbala and Baghdad to protest the chronic power cuts and the absence of basic services such as waste collection and drinking water. In Lebanon, protest groups such as You Stink, Save Beirut Heritage, Beirut Madinati and We Want Accountability are contesting a certain kind of urbanization and the loss of a certain city, but in doing so they are also actively creating (the city) Beirut. Protests demanding bread, freedom and social justice are the most visible sign of people claiming their right to the city while also engaging in the city’s very formation.

But social movements and protests are of course only one way that cities are constituted. Apart from the more formal mechanisms of urbanization—such as the construction of buildings and infrastructure that are accessible to urban inhabitants—the city is made and claimed through multiple everyday practices. Like a series of intricate cobwebs, the city is produced through overlapping networks, structures and practices of, inter alia, commerce, dwelling, infrastructure, capital, mobility, art, design, law, media, food, religion, politics, research, ideas, leisure, race and gender. Urbanization creates the conditions for these networks and practices to form the idea of the city. But as we have seen frequently in the region, urbanization can also destroy the very practices that it enables. Urbanization can be used to form the anti-city.

When we talk of the “loss of the city” it is the disintegration of these complex networks, these delicate cobwebs, to which we are referring. The loss of the city is the destruction of housing in the Bustan al-Basha neighborhood in Aleppo, but it is also the empty streets in the Solidere area of Beirut or the unoccupied apartment buildings of Abdali in Amman. It is low salaries and high rents, the decline of mobility and the rising cost of energy. The loss of the city is the inability to obtain affordable housing, water, electricity and gas; it is being unable to circulate through the urban context or engage in the networks that constitute the socio-political-religious life of the city. Processes of capitalist urbanization may be thriving in the region, but city life for far too many urban residents appears suspended over the abyss of the anti-city.

Endnotes

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