CITIES LOST & REMADE
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ARTICLES
2 The Urbanization of Power and the Struggle for the City
   Deen Sharp

POLITICAL ECONOMY
6 Globalized Authoritarianism and the New Moroccan City
   Koenraad Bogaert

12 “The Dubai of…”: Urban Loss in the Shadow of Gulf Urbanity
   An Interview with Yasser Elsheshtawy

18 Amman: Ruination in the City of Lost Nations
   Eliana Abu-Hamdi

22 Alexandria, City of Dispossession
   Youssef El Chazli

25 The Destructive Dreams of AKP Urbanism
   Ayse Çavdar

29 Abadan: The Rise and Demise of an Oil Metropolis
   Kaveh Ehsani and Rasmus Christian Elling

WAR AND CONFLICT
33 Generational Dislocations: One Hundred Years of Displacement in a Beirut Suburb
   Joanne Randa Nucho

36 Jerusalem’s Colonial Landscapes of Loss: From Deir Yassin to Khan al-Ahmar
   Thomas Abowd

39 “Mosul Will Never Be the Same”
   An Interview with Omar Mohammed

44 Sur: A City of Imagination, A City under Occupation
   Serra Hakyemez

EDITOR’S PICKS
48 New and Recommended Reading
PHOTOS/GRAPHICS

COVER
Top photo: Once filled with cafes and shops, the Qabaris neighborhood in the Old City area of Homs has been reduced to rubble. (Yuri Kozyrev/NOOR/Redux)

Bottom photo: The Dubai metro in the financial district. (Michael Amme/Iail/Redux)
The merciless killing by Israeli snipers of over 100 mostly unarmed Palestinians approaching the militarized fence around the Gaza Strip in May of 2018 was significant not simply for what it says about Israel’s callous disregard for Palestinian human rights. Israel’s misleading attempt to legitimate its shoot-to-kill policy in terms of a right to defend its sovereign borders belies the fact that its self-proclaimed “border” around Gaza is simply the outer boundary of an open-air prison of barbed wire fences, fortified gates and no-go zones over which Israel retains full control as an occupying power. The Palestinians being killed at the fence area are not hostile invaders but rather displaced and stateless peoples protesting against the cage Israel has built to keep them both boxed in and out.

Israel’s violence against displaced and stateless Palestinians in Gaza is significant more broadly as a dark exemplar of an unfolding global future: the proliferation of militarized walls, fences, no-go areas and increasingly lethal actions that police the space between the “green zones” of wealth and privilege and the “red zones” of the poor, excluded and stateless around the world. Israel’s militarized population management systems, border security technologies and anti-civilian weapons that are “battle tested” against Palestinians and then sold on the global market have found willing buyers and emulators among those seeking to contain, deter or eliminate unwanted populations. Increasingly militarized systems whether “made in Israel” or not, can be found along the US-Mexico border, Europe’s southern facing border zones, India’s border zone around Bangladesh, as well as the zones outside of gated communities in various global locations.

The articles in this issue of Middle East Report take us beyond these fortified walls and zones to illuminate some of the sources of displacement, dispossession and loss found throughout urban areas in the contemporary Middle East, which often produce the very population outflows that militarized border zones seek to contain. In our age of “planetary urbanization” many cities have become battlegrounds where insurgents seek asymmetrical advantage against opponents who increasingly target cities as if civilians no longer exist—the way Israel labels the entire urban fabric of Gazan society a “terrorist infrastructure” or the urban destruction campaigns undertaken by Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the US against ISIS. At the same time, global capitalist deregulation and privatization has given rise to what global sociologist Saskia Sassen terms “predatory formations” of investors, states and economic elites that target cities for speculative profit and nepotistic rewards, emptying them of their poor or rebellious inhabitants, whether in Amman, Istanbul or Morocco. Some urban inhabitants are forced to flee while others resist, remain and keep alive more just visions of their collective urban past and future whether in Gezi Park, Mosul or elsewhere.

It is with this issue that I am honored to take over the responsibilities as editor of Middle East Report, in addition to those as MERIP’s executive director, and to expand upon its nearly 50-year history of providing critical analyses and alternative perspectives about the Middle East and the forces within and outside of the region who seek to determine its future. I am particularly interested in ensuring that Middle East Report maintains its historic role as a platform where scholars, journalists, writers and activists converge to produce critical interventions into contemporary debates about the region without sacrificing our commitment to careful independent inquiry that has always been a hallmark of this publication.

—Steve Niva
The Urbanization of Power and the Struggle for the City

Deen Sharp

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 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 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 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 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

The urban has often been defined in opposition to the rural. But complicating definitions of urban areas is the fact

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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.” 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 $1.41 billion, an estimated four percent of GDP; by 1988 this had grown to $3.28 billion, representing ten percent of GDP. 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. 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. 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.

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 Khorrarmshahr 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). 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.” 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 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 Revolting New York\(^{17}\) 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.

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

3 Gregory Scruggs, “‘Everything We’ve Heard About Global Urbanization Turns out to Be Wrong’—Researchers,” Place, July 10, 2018: http://www.thisishisplace.org/?id=051012ea7f47bd0-b769-9cc35ef6f8d8a.
9 The difficulty in obtaining data in conflict contexts makes it hard to gauge the exact levels of urbanization, but analysts broadly agree that the rate of urbanization in Syria is currently increasing even in the context of continued conflict.
In two decades, Morocco’s large cities experienced dramatic changes. In 2009, the weekly magazine *TelQuel* referred to a veritable “urban revolution” following the launch of several megaprojects in cities like Tangiers, Casablanca and the capital Rabat. Exemplary flagship projects are Tanger Med, a deep-water port facility aspiring to become a nodal point for global maritime trade and a major hub of containerized transport; Casablanca Marina, a new skyscraper complex with offices and luxury residences redesigning the beachfront of the metropole between the Casa–Port train station and the magnificent Hassan II mosque; and the Bouregreg project, the largest urban renewal undertaking in the history of the country developing exclusive real estate, shopping malls, marinas and state-of-the-art cultural facilities along the estuary between Rabat and Salé. Together, these projects are radically transforming Morocco’s cityscapes.

Compared to other countries in North Africa, Morocco is a trendsetter in megaprojects. The regime envisions the country as connecting European capital networks with Africa, the Middle East and potentially Asia and the United States. The strategy of boosting the competitiveness of Morocco’s metropolitan areas reflects the country’s ambitions for global market integration. Under King Mohammed VI, urban megaprojects and large-scale infrastructural works came to characterize a shift toward “urban entrepreneurialism”: the increasingly autonomous and entrepreneurial role of cities in the extraction and creation of surplus value within an increasingly competitive global market.
Urban megaprojects, however, are only part of the story. From the beginning of his reign, Mohammed VI prioritized not only spectacular urban growth strategies involving land and property investment but also ambitious social development initiatives and poverty alleviation programs. A salient example is the Cities Without Slums (CWS) program launched in 2004. This nationwide slum eradication program offered a direct response to the urban crisis dramatically exposed by the suicide bombings in Casablanca in May 2003 that killed more than 40 people. All the suicide bombers came from Sidi Moumen, a slum area on the eastern periphery of Casablanca. The events strengthened the idea that the country’s neglect of its urban poor created a breeding ground for domestic terrorism. The attacks also undercut the city’s “unique selling proposition” and its image as a safe destination for investment.

These two kinds of urban projects bring to light the political practices that connect countries like Morocco to processes of globalization and illuminate how global capitalism is produced in cities such as Casablanca, Tangiers and Rabat. The transformation of the Moroccan city tells a broader story about the transformation of the state and the economy through neoliberal reform. Economic liberalization promised to undermine the power structures of authoritarian states, but in fact authoritarianism has persisted in new globalized forms.

A Shift in Ruling Power and Practice

Morocco’s urban entrepreneurialism emerged not from an implementation of textbook reforms. Rather, the move was part of a longer-term and contingent process of profound societal and political change, one that has been continuously adjusted in response to new challenges and problems. The origins of Morocco’s urban revolution date to the early 1980s. Like many countries in the Global South, Morocco faced a severe debt crisis and was forced to adopt a structural adjustment program pushed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in 1983.

These structural reforms posed some serious challenges to the ruling establishment. Privatization, market deregulation and fiscal discipline undermined the ability of state institutions to control both society and the economy. Austerity and structural adjustment had an immediate and devastating effect on poverty and social inequality, which contributed to numerous outbreaks of violence throughout the 1980s in the form of urban riots. These two factors threatened the position of the monarchy and its entourage. The gradual rethinking of the urban economy, in part through the launch of megaprojects and the implementation of new social programs, emerged in response to this new social and economic reality of structural adjustment and economic liberalization.3 In this context, the Moroccan city constitutes both a class project and a governmental problem. The goal is to generate economic growth and maintain political order through new strategies and techniques of accumulation, domination and population management.

The ruling elites in Morocco adapted to the new reality but also participated in its construction. The state sold economic assets at bargain prices and adopted neoliberal policies, assuring the future of the Moroccan bourgeoisie.4 Morocco’s elites who had occupied privileged positions in the state administration now made fortunes in the private sector. The royal family led by example. King Hassan II, for example, took control of Omnium Nord Africain—the largest private conglomerate in the country—from its French owners. The takeover signified an expansion of the monarchy’s activities from the conventional state-institutional realm of the parliament and the ministries to the private realm of business and market control. Today, King Mohammed VI is the country’s preeminent capitalist.

As neoliberal reforms created the conditions for new capitalist class relations alongside older neo-patrimonial and clientelist practices, the city became the privileged site for the elaboration of some of these new strategies. Neoliberal policies allowed the ruling elite to regain “in the private sector the influence that policies of economic liberalization were progressively eroding in government and the public sector.” Massive investments in real estate and slum-upgrading projects opened new opportunities for a privatized housing sector and influential individuals like Anas Sefroui, CEO of Addoha, and Alami Lazraq, CEO of Alliances, two of Morocco’s largest real estate companies. Neoliberal reforms also allowed the ruling elite to reinforce external political relationships, as the economic restructuring strengthened the position of foreign (particularly French) investors in the domestic market. The already strong relations between the French political elite and the monarchy allowed French multinationals like Bouygues and Alstom to acquire a dominant position in the Moroccan economy.

Urban projects in Morocco were profoundly shaped by the ways in which the interests of capital converged with security concerns and the problem of cities prone to riots. Cities were brought to the forefront in the construction of a new social order both as privileged spaces for capital accumulation and land commodification, as well as laboratories for the development of new modalities of government, social control and political domination.

Consequently, there is a political symbiosis between urban megaprojects and social initiatives such as Cities Without Slums. While the first are directly concerned with opening places to the global market, the second are concerned with the transformation of urban life itself—especially the lives of the urban poor who have a historical record of social protest and urban violence—and its adaptation to the new conditions brought forth by neoliberal globalization.

The City as a Class Project

In the Bouregreg river valley between Rabat and Salé lies a project that illustrates the tendency to prioritize the exchange
value of the city (how to sell the city) over its use value (how to make the best possible city for its citizens). The valley is being transformed from a dumping ground and relatively degraded space into a modern urban center connecting two historic urban rivals: the bourgeois administrative capital and seat of the ruling class, and its neighbor depicted as plagued by urban poverty, informal housing and Islamist opposition. Launched in 2006, the Bouregreg project exploits the valley’s strategic location and historic cultural resources such as the Hassan tower and the casbah of the Oudayas. The project encompasses a territory of 6,000 hectares alongside the Bouregreg riverbanks to be developed in six phases. The first two phases, relatively advanced, include the construction of luxury residences, hotels, marinas, commercial centers, an archeological museum and the Grand Theatre, designed by the late “starchitect” Zaha Hadid. The fluid sculptural form of the theatre, inspired by the movement of the river itself, is intended to serve as a new landmark for the city. The project also includes infrastructural works such as the new Moulay Hassan bridge, two tramlines, a tunnel underneath the historic casbah and a new ring highway to improve mobility between the two cities.

The planning and design of a new urban dream world in the valley not only evidences the aesthetic transformation of Moroccan cities but also sheds light on changes in decision-making and state power. To realize this project, the state created the Agency for the Development of the Bouregreg Valley through Law 16–04. The Agency has exclusive authority over the project within its 6,000 hectare territorial boundaries, overseeing land previously under the jurisdiction of prefectures, local municipalities and the Rabat–Salé Urban Planning Agency. The Agency is authorized to develop zoning plans, organize public inquiries, provide public infrastructure, allocate land for construction, deliver construction permits, regulate all deeds of sale and expropriate private land deemed necessary for the project. All state-owned land was transferred to the Agency free of charge.

The Bouregreg Agency also operates as an intermediary between foreign investors and the Moroccan political scene. It attracts investors, such as the Abu Dhabi–based real estate...
company Eagle Hills or the sovereign wealth fund Wessal Capital and gives them decision-making power. The Agency adopts plans, goals and strategies that best serve the interests of foreign investors. The original plan for the first phase of the Bouregreg project included the construction of a public space and green esplanade with palm trees in front of the medina of Salé where citizens could stroll and picnic. To increase private investor profit, however, that portion of the plan was eventually replaced with a gated community.

Urban planning and government thus become more accountable to investors and markets than to citizens. Long-term policy agendas have been deferred in favor of placating potential investors. Even if local authorities were to become more democratically accountable, democracy has been short-circuited by institutional arrangements like the Bouregreg Agency. Citizens have little capacity to influence the projects that are reshaping their own cities.

The creation of such an agency represents more than just a shift in state power from the national level to the city. The global elites involved in local politics do not so much weaken state authority as become active players within these new state agencies. In this sense, authoritarianism in Morocco was not undermined by economic liberalization; it was re-institutionalized and rescaled, with power shared with new global actors.

The manipulation of land and public resources through megaprojects like the Bouregreg development—not only in Morocco but in cities globally—has resulted in urban space being controlled with little public transparency. Social groups who would be otherwise welcome if these spaces were publicly owned and democratically controlled are finding themselves excluded. The luxury apartments, the higher prices for consumer goods, the guards outside the fences that surround the first phase of the Bouregreg project—situated next to the ancient medina of Salé and its primarily poorer residents—make clear that this new urban center is not meant for ordinary citizens. While the project may transform the Bouregreg valley into a globalized space, that space is not accessible or affordable to those who live in its immediate surroundings.

The Bouregreg project is not an isolated example. Moroccan authoritarianism has been transformed by the intertwining of the interests of ruling domestic elites and global economic actors. Whereas Hassan II ruled with an iron hand, Mohamed VI rules via holdings, funds and new state agencies. The result is not less authoritarianism, but rather authoritarianism with a different face: new institutions, new planning methods and new (global) relations of power.

The City as a Governmental Problem

Urban spectacles like the Bouregreg project do not take place in a social vacuum. Developers rarely have the opportunity to design cities from scratch. Already existing urban life, its movement, its connections and its particular interests and desires can pose considerable problems and even threats from the viewpoint of those in power. Urban planning is thus largely a problem of government. Given international attention to human rights and democracy promotion, state repression of urban life can potentially compromise a country’s desired global image.

Indeed, poverty and slums pose considerable challenges for urban class projects. In response to the disruptive moment of debt relief, structural adjustment and the coinciding riots in the early 1980s, Moroccan authorities reverted to repressive methods in the name of securitizing the urban territory. These methods, however, have proven ineffective in resolving the enduring economic crisis or consolidating the neoliberal transition. Authorities needed to integrate the so-called dangerous classes into the new neoliberal social order.

The Cities Without Slums program launched in 2004 stands as an example. In contrast to the more top-down methods of slum upgrading of the 1980s, the new program symbolized a shift from repression to integration. Inscribed into the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, CWS promoted principles such as participation, consent and economic empowerment through home ownership. Many national and international observers believed that the CWS program demonstrated the commitment of the monarchy to the ideals of social inclusion, good governance and participatory development.

The program targeted 362,000 households spread across more than 1,000 shantytowns (bidonvilles) in 85 cities and towns. The cost was estimated to be 25 billion Moroccan dirhams ($2.62 billion), of which 10 billion was funded by the state via the Solidarity Fund for Housing. The state offered 3,500 hectares of public land to the project for sums far below market price. Authorities set up public-private partnerships and acted as guarantors for beneficiaries’ debts with commercial banks. Some 80 percent of the slum-upgrading operations involved resettlement, often to the peripheries of the city. In addition to state support, CWS is also funded by international agencies such as the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the French Development Agency. USAID and other organizations provided expertise and technical assistance. In May 2018, 59 cities were declared slum-free, involving a total of 277,583 resettled households.

Most observers consider the program to have failed to fulfill its social promises. Instead of reducing poverty, it merely relocated poverty to the urban peripheries. Nevertheless, the program was politically significant for other reasons. First, CWS symbolized a changing relationship between those who govern and the governed and among the governed themselves. The program furthered the replacement of the social contract of the post-colonial developmental state in which citizens garnered certain social privileges and rights (e.g., public employment) in exchange for their loyalty to the regime, with one that
promotes self-responsibility and encourages citizens to seize the opportunities of the free market. Through the fostering of home ownership, the facilitation of access to credit and the integration of informal housing into the formal market, CWS attempted to create a more self-reliant and entrepreneurial citizen. A new method of social engineering, called *accompagnement social*, has sought to gain the trust of slum dwellers by increasing their participation in the resettlement operation. Small teams on the ground organize information sessions, provide administrative and financial assistance and accompany the beneficiary through their move to a new location.

The program aims to achieve “sustained behavioral change.” According to a document by Al Omrane, the leading public operator behind CWS, “access to ownership allows slum dwellers to improve their living conditions and induces a *new social behavior*.” The goal is to transform the informal urban poor into consuming, taxpaying and indebted homeowners. According to program officials, once people are turned into indebted consumers, they will become responsible citizens with a proper job and a proper lifestyle. CWS illustrates how authorities require slum dwellers to participate in the making of a political world in which civic rights and social justice are circumscribed not only by the regime but also by the sanctions and incentives of the free market.

The CWS program serves a second and related objective by giving authorities more bureaucratic control over a population perceived to be a threat. CWS enabled authorities to break up previously impenetrable urban neighborhoods characterized by the crisscross of shanties and unpaved narrow alleys. Slum dwellers were rehoused in new, more governable social housing blocs. According to a Moroccan Ministry of Housing manual, the added value of new rehousing practices developed by CWS was the “*improvement of the quality of information [on the slum dwellers] available to the decision-makers*.”

Finally, the CWS program also reconfigured the Moroccan economy by providing the regulatory framework and official support for the setup of public-private partnerships and the attraction of private investment in the housing sector. As such, it unlocked forms of capital previously inaccessible to the market, including both public property and the slum dwellers’ informal economic arrangements. Authorities intended poverty alleviation schemes in Morocco not only to prevent radicalization and enhance governmental control, but also to open new frontiers for profit and the exploitation of what Ananya Roy calls “poverty capital.”

### Toward a Globalized Authoritarianism?

Urban spectacles like the Bouregreg project and social initiatives like the CWS program were instrumental in burnishing the image of Moroccan exceptionalism characterized by good governance, social inclusion, participatory development and authoritarian moderation. Particularly during the first decade of the twenty-first century, Morocco’s urban revolution sought to present a new Morocco led by Mohammed VI, a benevolent monarch with a clear economic vision and a caring heart for the disadvantaged. This image contrasted sharply with the authoritarian depiction of King Hassan II.

This narrative of a Moroccan exception, of course, has been challenged in recent years, given the crackdown on independent journalism and the ongoing repression of revolts in the Rif region and elsewhere. Yet, the critique of Moroccan exceptionalist focuses almost exclusively on the apparent resurfacing of repressive methods of political rule, while some of the very reforms that gave rise to the exceptionalist narrative remain unscrutinized. Rather than understanding Morocco as an authoritarian regime gradually incorporating liberal and social reforms that could form the basis for a genuine process of political liberalization, recent Moroccan urban reforms are part of a qualitative transformation of authoritarian rule toward a globalized authoritarianism better adapted to the reality of neoliberal global markets.

In the process, the Moroccan city is turning into an entrepreneurial city where decision-making processes are breaking loose from conventional political entities and poor urban life is being transformed and integrated into a new market-based ecosystem. Under pressure to democratize and respect human rights, political authority and decision-making power has been increasingly concentrated in exceptional zones like the Bouregreg valley, where state power becomes allied with global capital and political control over the urban poor has been extended through market mechanisms and new governmental techniques alongside traditional coercive forms.

### Endnotes

3. For a more detailed historical account, see Koerstraad Bogaert, *Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums and Class Relations in Urban Morocco* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
"The Dubai of..."
Urban Loss in the Shadow of Gulf Urbanity

Over the last several decades, and particularly after upheavals in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, much of the urban center of gravity of the Middle East has shifted to the Gulf. To understand this trend and its consequences, MERIP editorial committee member Jillian Schwedler interviewed Yasser Elsheshtawy in Philadelphia on June 4, 2018. Dr. Elsheshtawy, a professor of architecture at United Arab Emirates University from 1997 to 2017, is currently adjunct professor of architecture at Columbia University. Considered an authority on urbanism in the region, Elsheshtawy focuses on urbanization in developing societies, informal urbanism, urban history and environment-behavior studies, with a particular focus on Middle Eastern cities.

Should Gulf cities like Dubai be dismissed as inauthentic and artificial?

Dubai is very much a work in progress. Its urbanization began in earnest in the 1960s, building within the historic core and then branching out to the east and west. This rapid development has left a lot of empty spaces that have not been built yet, so it does give a feeling of a fragmented city. Parts of the city are spectacular and very modern, and other parts are more lived-in with a higher density. There are definitely multiple Dubais.

People from Russia, Iran and India flock to Gulf cities to buy as a form of investment and rent to expats. But even in Dubai, half of the high-rise buildings are empty. There is not a significant population that lives there permanently, so if there is any trouble—a war breaks out with Iran, for example—people will just leave. During the 2008 financial crisis, people were driving out to the airport, leaving their cars there and escaping the city. You could feel the city getting emptier, the roads less crowded, and that's a very recent memory. Saudi novelist Abdul Rahman Munif named his novel Cities of Salt because these glass cities, as he called them, are as if they were built from salt: When the water comes—that is, with any sign of trouble—they will dissolve away. At least some significant portion of the population can and might easily leave, so these cities are precarious in terms of their permanence.

That most visible part of the city—the spectacular city with high-rises, skyscrapers and new communities—is photographed and talked about in terms of transience and artificiality, a different kind of temporality. But there is this other part, the working-class neighborhoods with higher population density, that has a stronger sense of permanence. These people try to set down roots even if they know they will leave. In the older parts, where service workers and the migrant populations are concentrated, residents personalize spaces like their balconies, celebrating with outdoor festivals and gathering in public spaces for all kinds of social interactions. They are trying to establish some permanence in a city that was basically designed and planned to be temporary.

Do those communities cluster around areas of origin, for example, with North Africans in one area and Filipinos in another?

Some areas in the city are certainly associated with certain ethnic groups. Little Manila, for example, is basically one street in the district of Satwa that is the focus of Philippine businesses, restaurants and social gatherings. Other places are closely associated with South Asian migrant communities, particularly around Bur Dubai, where there is a Hindu temple. These communities are very visible and alive, particularly during the Diwali festival. Dubai also has a large African population and, more recently, Chinese. The latter are concentrated in a
main area of the city called Nasser Square (the official name is Baniyas) where there is a Little China nearby. It’s not as big as you see in North American cities, but there are lots of Chinese stores, streets with lanterns and Chinese restaurants. I did some behavioral mapping in that square and found a section dominated by Chinese women who come with their children and hang out in their own world.

But I wouldn’t say that you can clearly differentiate between, for example, an African neighborhood and a Chinese neighborhood. The city is more segregated along class lines and social-economic status is the dominant marker of neighborhoods. The central or historic area is populated by lower/middle-class South Asians, Chinese, Filipinos, Africans and Egyptians. Expatriates who have a higher status and income, whether they are Western or Arabs, also live in gated communities. Many Emiratis live in their own neighborhoods far from the city, and this is where you have segregation based on ethnicity.

**Does the historic area hold some meaning in the regime’s own telling of its heritage or roots in the area?**

When we talk about the historic part of Dubai, we talk about the areas near the creek that divides the city into two parts. The east part is called Deira and the west is Bur Dubai. The only historic marker that remains from the nineteenth century is a little fort that dates to 1820 that had been largely demolished and then reconstructed in the twentieth century. The historic district of Bastakiya also dates to the early twentieth century and has been reconstructed. The old morphology—meaning the street layout with narrow alleyways—is still there, but the buildings are mostly from the 1960s and 1970s.

**Is that historic area preserved as a tourist site?**

Yes, the Dubai Museum is there, and the site is part of the historical itinerary when people come to visit the city. But it has been heavily reconstructed and bears little resemblance to what existed in the past: a ramshackle arrangement of temporary buildings occupied by poor people, in addition to more permanent structures occupied by wealthier merchants from Iran. But the city’s oldest historical core has taken on a new meaning from that past.

The story about how the area came to be reconstructed is actually really interesting. In the 1970s, the city was modernizing with new buildings, port infrastructure and so on. They were looking at these places not as historical sites to be preserved, but as places to dismantle so they could build there. The oldest part of the city was largely occupied by squatters, so they were actively demolishing older buildings to displace them. There’s a story that Britain’s Prince Charles came to visit the city in the 1980s and saw them demolishing this historical district, and he asked, “Why are you getting rid of that? You
should keep it!” And they said, “OK, sure,” and then they literally stopped the demolition!

That very small area has been emptied of its residents and reconstructed with museums, shops, fancy galleries and some heritage areas; it’s basically a place for foreign tourists. Some Emiratis might visit, and the government is trying to bring people back with the annual art fair. But the area mostly caters to expatriates and tourists who want to experience the “old” Dubai. None of that is really authentic. The authentic part is when you go to the souq and the market, which is nearby, because there you find that many of the old trades continue. And there is something else authentic: If you want to cross from one side of the creek to the other, you take these small wooden boats. That process of crossing dates back to the early twentieth century and continues until this day, mostly by South Asians who need to move back and forth for work. This is really where you can experience the authentic city.

**Can you say more about the nostalgia for ancient cities, juxtaposed to the modern cities? Does nostalgia work differently across class lines?**

Nostalgia is definitely part of the urban discourse, but I think it is more recent. It makes sense to think about how nostalgia varies across the region. In a place like Doha, Qatar, they re-created Souq Waqif in the middle of the city to replace an old market that used to exist there. But the new market doesn’t reflect the structures that used to exist because those shops dated only to the 1960s and 1970s. The new market is quite large with open spaces and outdoor shops, but it also aims to create a market based on certain visions of what an Arab market should look like. It has been in operation for 12 years and is very successful, even with local Qataris, as well as expats and foreigners. The new market is a response to a certain nostalgic longing for a past, for a sense of history. The South Asian workers who used to frequent the old market, of course, are now excluded because the kinds of activities that they would engage in—congregating in large numbers—is not really possible.

In Kuwait, they also maintain some aspects of their past, particularly some reconstructed markets. In Abu Dhabi and Dubai, city officials who were previously engaged in dismantling the past now realize the value of these historical reconstructions.

**By value, do you mean for tourism, for creating profits or for creating an official narrative of the past?**

A bit of each. They hold heritage festivals in these spaces. In Abu Dhabi, an annual festival in the middle of the city, near its historic fort, brings in women engaged in handicrafts where people can interact and sample “traditional” foods. Those festivals are mostly for the local population, but expats and tourists also come. These are all state initiatives, forums for the ruling family to legitimize its presence and show that it is maintaining traditions and protecting the people from the incursion of Western influence. But these are temporary events that do not have any permanent influence on the way the city is planned or built.

**You haven’t mentioned Saudi Arabia. What is its relationship to heritage and the past?**

In many ways Saudi Arabia is an extreme case. In cities like Riyadh and Mecca, the historic core no longer exists. But Jidda is a bit different. It’s on the west coast and traditionally has been a very different kind of society. Because of trade it has always been more cosmopolitan and open, with people coming in from very different parts of the world. Residents in Jidda will tell you, “We’re not really Saudis, we are different.” As a result, the old part of the city still exists, albeit in neglect, but there are attempts to revitalize and preserve the buildings because they are very beautiful. Some parts remind you of the older parts of Cairo. But as you go further east and inland, that sense of history isn’t there. One reason—and this is true across the Gulf—is that the past still tends to be associated with poverty and deprivation. Some residents would tell you that they want to revive the past in terms of social customs, but they don’t really have anything that is worth preserving in terms of physical objects or buildings. As Bedouin, they roamed the desert and lived in temporary residences, so the past as a physical presence doesn’t hold the same value as it does in Cairo, Beirut or Damascus. In Mecca recently, the Saudis completely destroyed the Ottoman architecture and built new luxury high-rises in their place. Imagine, this is the most holy site in Islam, and they don’t have any attachment to its historical or heritage value.

**Is that in part because the Ottomans were seen as outsiders?**

The government authorities, and perhaps even a large chunk of the population, just do not care. It’s part of what you might call the Wahhabi ideology, a belief system that looks with suspicion at the reverence of objects and people. According to that mindset, preserving old buildings is a way of adding sacred value to an object, and that is counter to their ideology. To them old buildings are just something that existed; they don’t mean anything and can be easily removed.

Look at what is happening in Yemen. The Saudi coalition is actively engaged in destroying large parts of the Yemeni heritage, just bombing indiscriminately. They don’t care. It’s the same ideology or principles as used by the Taliban when they destroyed the ancient Buddhist statues in Bamiyan. They want to destroy anything ancient. And the Saudis are now actively destroying a significant part of the Yemeni heritage, as if they want that heritage to not exist.

**In thinking about the destruction of certain cities or parts of them, what broader issues come to mind?**

When you look at notions of destruction and loss, clearly in cases like Sanaa, Cairo, Damascus or Aleppo, loss acquires an historical connotation, for example, as in an historical
district. In the Gulf, people have lived in a place for a couple of decades and have formed attachments within these neighborhoods, but those attachments aren’t considered historically relevant. Yet it does have relevance because those people have memories; these were places where whole communities lived for a long time. Across the region, whole neighborhoods are sadly being dismantled and replaced with mixed-use, high-end buildings.

There is a neighborhood right near the Burj Khalifa, one of the tallest buildings in the world. That tower was built in what was a former military base, but now it is surrounded by a super fancy and expensive neighborhood. Across from it and past a major highway used to be a neighborhood built in the 1970s called Shabiyat al-Shurta, the police neighborhood; the area itself is called al-Wasl. That neighborhood was planned and built for government employees who were not rich and the state provided them with housing. The houses were standardized one-story units but over the years they acquired a very interesting character as they became more lived-in. There was a humanity to them that you don’t see in other parts of the city because people individualized them. A few years ago, the government decided to build a high-end development in that area because it is prime real estate overlooking the Burj Khalifa. Phase 1 began with a shopping mall, then by Phase 3 the residents were uprooted and the neighborhood demolished.

Were they relocated?

It depends. They were Emirati, but there are different degrees of Emirati. If you are a full citizen, they give you another house somewhere in the suburbs or outskirts of the city. But some citizens are not full Emirati. They have a paper that gives them citizenship, but they don’t have what they call a family book which allows you to get all the benefits of the state: housing, a job, education. It is not known how many there are, but unofficial estimates put them in the thousands. They did not acquire full citizenship status when the state was formed in the 1970s for numerous reasons. Some were just too lazy to apply or illegals who came and decided to stay. Others were Emirati women who married foreigners and thus could not transfer citizenship to their kids (that law was changed recently). But there is discrimination, and most of those ineligible for another house were just given monetary compensation.

I visited the neighborhood prior to its demolition. Some residents said they were looking forward to moving to bigger houses but still there was this sense of loss, particularly among the elderly. One guy told us about his mother, who lived with her extended family in one of these houses. Around the house was this garden that pretty much covered the whole structure; it was really quite fascinating. He told us that his mother waters this garden every day, and the neighbors would tell her, “You are leaving here soon. Why are you doing that?” And
she would say, “I’ve lived here my entire life. I want to keep nurturing my garden.”

A few months later they left and the neighborhood was destroyed. It is now being built over by these super-exclusive mixed housing units. This kind of neoliberal urbanization is happening in many parts of the world. But when you start doing it in a place like Dubai where there are not that many neighborhoods with history, you are pretty much getting rid of any connection to your past, even if that connection is tenuous and that past is not an extended past like you have in other cities. It’s a central loss. And it’s happening in the Gulf and in other parts of Dubai. I think this should be an important area for research—why this is being done, why there is no resistance against that. The developer who is doing this project, Meraas, is a private company. But it is owned by Dubai’s ruling family, so they are basically operating as a private developer but with access to all that land.

Are there conversations among architects there about responsible development or about the cost on the lives of people being displaced? Not really because in the Gulf the question of citizenship is very different. Emiratis are only 15 to 20 percent of the population and there is an implicit agreement between the local population and the ruling family that the ruling family will take care of them, provide housing, education and healthcare. But in return, don’t question what we do. There is no debate, no back-and-forth, no participatory dimension of planning, no community groups coming together even voicing disagreement let alone actively protesting. Even voicing disagreement would be viewed as a serious form of subversion. The large expat and migrant population living in these areas, of course, don’t have rights at all. If you object, you can be subjected to various punitive measures. It is not a democracy where as a taxpayer you have certain rights, and nobody has any illusions about that.

There is only one interesting case of organized opposition to a development project. While I was working on my book on Dubai around 2006, I encountered a public housing project that had been in operation since the 1970s. It was occupied by Arabs and South Asians, a mix of lower-class and even a few middle-class residents. It was public housing like you would see anywhere; repetitive buildings for several blocks near the airport, called the Rashid Colony. The government decided to demolish this project and replace it with other uses. But the people who lived there knew that if they moved out they would not be able to afford to rent in the city. So they protested and went to the municipality. It was so unusual. Their protests were heavily documented in the media, showing Sudanese, Egyptians and Indians coming together. I went to visit the colony while this was going on and I saw graffiti on one of the buildings that said, “We won’t leave.” It was remarkable that something like that existed in Dubai. But the overall sentiment was that the demolition would go on as planned.

But then for a while we didn’t hear much about the project, and it wasn’t demolished. In fact, they even upgraded some of the buildings, cleaned up the area a little bit and opened a metro station nearby! I visited just before I left, and it is as vibrant as ever. As an illustration of how much the neighborhood had become integrated into the city’s economy, last year an acquaintance of mine—an Iranian PhD student in Milan—was doing fieldwork in the city and stayed with an Indian family renting a room there through Airbnb.

In the end, I think the residents of the project reached an agreement that rent would be raised a little. But the neighborhood remains intact, a rare example of people coming together to object to a project and not really being subjected to any severe measure for doing so. I believe it happened around the time of the financial crisis when a lot of construction projects were put on hold. As of now the project is still there but it could be demolished when someone decides they want it for another project.

Has urban planning in the Gulf had an impact on urban planning elsewhere in the Middle East? Yes, the Gulf has had a major impact on the region. In Cairo, for example, this Gulf-based urbanity—especially Dubai as a model—is exerting a wholesale hold on people’s imaginations. Its impact on urban space within Egypt manifests itself in
different ways. First, Gulf-based developers are working in Cairo, so projects that you might find in Dubai or Abu Dhabi are now replicated in Egypt. Just recently, the Mall of Egypt opened with a ski slope built by the Dubai-based developer that built the Mall of Dubai, which also has a ski slope. It’s basically a copy of that model inserted into a Cairo context, and people just love it. Cairo Festival City is the same thing. Even New Cairo is an attempt to recreate an urbanization model influenced by the Gulf. Of course, the Gulf didn’t invent gated communities. But because Dubai is in the region it exerts a very strong influence on the urban imagination.

Second, the desire for a Gulf urbanity is also coming strongly from within other countries. New Cairo, Egypt’s new capital, has been described as a “new Dubai” in Egypt. At an event organized a few months ago by Bir Zeit University and the Cultural Center in Orléans, France, people were talking about the dream of creating the Palestinian state. I was asked to speak about Gulf urbanism and how that might be something they should consider. They told me that in the West Bank, a Qatari-based developer in partnership with a Palestinian businessman is building a gated, mixed-use community, called Rawabi. They are not even sure who will live there! Similar projects are happening in Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan. Gulf involvement is not necessarily direct—although it sometimes is—but often the projects are an emulation of Dubai and Gulf cities as the desired model, instigated by local decision makers.

I find it interesting that the Gulf is the model today, whereas urban development projects in the region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—in Cairo, Tunis, Beirut and elsewhere—often referenced Paris as the model: “The Paris of…” this or that. Yes, that’s exactly right. Now it’s all “the Dubai of…” this or that, and it is not just happening in the region. I was just reading about Grozny, the Chechen city destroyed by Russia. They are rebuilding it with the highest tower in Europe and

It was built right next to a poor area of Darb al-Ahmar but, at least I was told, the park was designed to be accessible to the lower classes. I visited it during construction in the 1990s when one of my friends was working on it with the Aga Khan Foundation. They turned what was literally a mountain of garbage accumulated over millennia into a vast garden next to the City of the Dead! As they were cleaning it up they uncovered part of the old Cairo wall.

The way the project was designed is that on one side of the park is a highway and the other overlooks a poor community in Darb al-Ahmar. The park was designed to have two entrances: Those entering from the highway would pay full price, but those entering from the poor area would pay just a nominal fee. They do hold fancy events in the park’s expensive restaurant—where you had iftar—but anyone can walk around the park. It really is quite beautiful, and you can see a real mix of people. The park is a rare example of inclusivity, and part of the project included upgrading the Darb al-Ahmar neighborhood. I think the effort was really sincere.

By comparison, the few remaining public spaces in Dubai are being privatized. The Corniche, for example—a walkway by the creek open to lower income residents—has been taken over by the developer that demolished the neighborhood I mentioned near Burj Khalifa. It is being turned into outdoor retail spaces with crafts and coffee shops. I think that part of the reason, besides economics, is to discourage lower-class people coming together and to minimize the possibility for protests. In fact, all public space, if we can call it that, is heavily controlled to prevent resistance. The city is blanketed with CCTV cameras, and one news article said that the feed goes to control rooms equipped with software that can detect “abnormal behavior.” It’s a very dystopian situation.

Are people in Dubai happy that everyone wants to be Dubai?

[Laughing] Yes, it’s a source of great pride. There is a controversial notion that Dubai and the Gulf are the center of the Arab world in terms of culture, urbanism and architecture, while the rest of the Middle East lies in ruins. The real danger now is that Gulf urbanity is dominating discourse in the older cities, moving them toward a neoliberal model of urban development. Cases like Al-Azhar Park, which is not about commerce but about bringing people together, are rare. That kind of thinking just isn’t part of the paradigm of Gulf urbanity. They would probably look at the park as a place for gated communities or a Mall of Old Cairo!

I wrote a piece called “Tribes with Cities” in 2013 in response to the Gulf–based commentators, Sultan al-Qasimi. He was heavily attacked for writing that the Gulf was the center of culture in the region. People said you cannot have culture in a place like the Gulf. I responded from an urban-architectural perspective, arguing that, yes, the urban model today—the model everyone aspires to—is not Cairo or Beirut, but the Gulf. But that doesn’t mean it’s a good model, or one that we should emulate.

Last year in Cairo I went to an iftar at al-Azhar Park, a beautiful green space with sculptures, waterfalls, fountains, trees, even a small river.
Amman
Ruination in the City of Lost Nations
Eliana Abu-Hamdi

Amman has absorbed influxes of refugees for decades, each perpetuating political and cultural tensions in a country already fragmented by tribal allegiances. While these divisions provide an easy scapegoat as to why the country continues to struggle financially, politically and developmentally, state policies and practices are at least as responsible as external pressures for exacerbating Jordan’s domestic troubles.

Most significantly, the state’s deregulated planning practices and its haste in undertaking neoliberal policies to attract transnational capital investment have resulted in numerous failed development projects. Instead of fast-tracking projects that might bring economic growth, deregulated planning practices have produced a series of incomplete and poorly planned projects, among them the Jordan Gate Towers and the Limitless Towers. These and other projects stand half-built as if frozen in time, icons of a trend of ruination that has swept across West and South Jordan.

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Amman. East Amman, meanwhile, has remained largely underdeveloped, preserved as the “old city” to satisfy the touristic thirst for authenticity.

The conundrum lies in the fact that even in a state of incompleteness or failure, these projects can be financially desirable for the state and its oligarchic network. They can be made profitable through the state’s appropriation of public and privately held lands as “state domain,” in turn selling the properties to private developers at a premium.

Building a City of Lost Nations

The notion of a unified Jordanian identity has been challenged throughout the state’s short history. At least since British involvement in Jordan escalated in 1917, political allegiances have been arranged by systems of tribal communalism and parochialism. Although ‘Abdullah I succeeded in establishing allegiance amongst Jordan’s various tribes during his brief reign as king (1946–1951), a united national identity was tenuous at best. Allegiances were further fractured as Amman’s Circassian refugee community, who settled there in the late eighteenth century, was joined by flows of Palestinians in 1948 and 1967, Iraqis after the Gulf war of 1991 and invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Syrians since the uprising begun there in 2011. These influxes of refugees have rendered the capital a city of lost nations and often conflicting identities.

In response, King Hussein, who ruled from 1952 until his death in 1999 and his son and successor ‘Abdullah II embraced a series of urban interventions for Amman as a way to mold a citizenry and promote nationalist sentiment. For Hussein, those interventions took the form of subsidized public housing, while ‘Abdullah II favored spectacular architecture that promised economic growth. While differing in impetus and consequence, the motives behind the development plans were similar. Both kings strove to produce a cohesive Jordanian identity—amongst a society fractured by political and tribal divisions—and to translate that identity into allegiance toward the state.

‘Abdullah II is often credited with tempering the influence of tribes and their village councils, but this effort began under his father. In 1988, Hussein established the Greater Amman Municipality in an effort to bureaucratize the city and the Greater Amman Comprehensive Development Plan to manage all planning and policy decisions. While these decisions were allocated to the state, so too were a series of urban interventions deployed as bureaucratic mechanisms of control. Most significantly, the Development Plan proposed a new satellite city called Abu Nuseir located approximately nine miles north-east of the city center. Constructed in 1988, the project represented a prototype for a modern way of life at odds with dominant traditional forms of tribal communalism. Abu Nuseir’s community design worked to dismantle longstanding systems of kinship and tribalism, directing allegiance and political reach away from tribal communities and toward the state.

Upon his ascension, ‘Abdullah II embraced a development agenda that also manifested in the built environment, once again transforming the city of Amman into a space used
for the purpose of advancing a political project. To temper resistance to the ambitious development agenda, Abdullah II launched the Jordan First initiative that promoted a nationalist message aimed at capitalizing and building on sentiments of civic pride. Support for state-led development was also advanced in the follow-up campaign, We Are All Jordan. The most significant project begun in the wake of the Jordan First initiative was the Jordan Gate Towers. The project was facilitated by systems of deregulated planning and tenuous collaborations with private developers that have produced a series of failed neoliberal projects, the Jordan Gate Towers among them. Each of these projects illustrate how even failed projects can be made profitable through the state’s appropriation of public and privately held lands as “state domain.”

State-Led Urbanism

The emphasis of King Hussein’s government-subsidized public housing in the Development Plan—and, in particular, its Five-Year Implementation Plan—was to win favor among the public. The plans also strategically undermined the power long held by village councils. Each village council was led by a mubktar (tribal elder) and had its own political and social motivations. Hussein argued that these tribal councils limited the state’s ability to develop the capital city of Amman and to govern itself as a cohesive entity; and so the councils were subsumed by the Greater Amman Municipality.

By forming the Greater Amman Municipality and instituting new planning controls, the state was able to designate areas for vast amounts of new public housing and label these projects a public right and amenity—in other words, as a privilege of state citizenship. In this way, the state sought to redefine citizenship and craft a sense of Jordanian identity bound to the nation rather than to individual tribes. The Abu Nuseir public housing project was essential to the creation of a civic-minded society as it provided first choice of subsidized public housing to government employees and second choice to Jordanians in general. But the project also represented a prototype for a modern way of life, in contrast to dominant traditional forms of tribal communalism.

The state was able to subsidize housing due to the receipt of $550 million in the 1970s, increasing to $1.3 billion in direct fund transfers from neighboring Gulf states in the 1980s. The government steadily dispensed rentier capital in the form of subsidies to its citizens, in a sense purchasing the obedience of the population as if it were a commodity. The public. The plans also strategically undermined the power long held by village councils. Each village council was led by a mubktar (tribal elder) and had its own political and social motivations. Hussein argued that these tribal councils limited the state’s ability to develop the capital city of Amman and to govern itself as a cohesive entity; and so the councils were subsumed by the Greater Amman Municipality.

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This unity tugged on the civic and cultural heartstrings of Jordan’s residents and encouraged them to come together in support of the king’s planning policies. The notion of unity implicit in the initiative was intended to transcend the tensions over national identity that had long fractured the city and nation.

Building Ruination

Perhaps the most troubling of all of the developmental undertakings in this neoliberal era is the Jordan Gate Towers. The land for the project was acquired through an inversion of the planning practice of eminent domain—that is, the government seized public land for private use. The state originally acquired the Towers site in 1959 through the process of eminent domain to build a water tank and public park to service the neighboring area. In 1978, a portion of that land was allocated by the Municipality as land suitable for tourism-related construction, and in 1984 the Amra Hotel was constructed on a portion of the plot. In 2004, the Municipality received a request for the construction of a mega-project on the remaining plot of land, and later that year the request was approved. Public land was again expropriated for private use.

The Jordan Gate Towers project, with its two iconic, glistening, 500-foot-tall towers strategically placed atop one of the city’s many hills, was intended to be Amman’s landmark of prosperity and modernity. In addition to the 44-story towers, the project’s design included an office park and a luxury hotel accompanied by high-end boutiques. The Hilton International hotel would neatly bookend the project’s highly exclusive air as a privatized enclave within the mixed-use neighborhood. Construction on the project began in earnest in the spring of 2005 and continued without much incident until August 2006, when the first of many construction mishaps occurred: The eighth floor of the north tower caught fire. While no one was injured in that incident, a month later three floors of the same tower collapsed, killing four construction workers and injuring 16 others. Construction continued over the next several years until, in May 2009, one of the construction cranes—at this point as much a fixture of the skyline as the towers themselves—collapsed onto the street below. Neighboring buildings were evacuated and residents
relocated to nearby hotels for several days until the broken crane could be dismantled.

The construction mishaps at the Towers and the dangers they posed to the surrounding community call into question the planning decisions that facilitated it. Planning across Amman is haphazard because it lacks basic guiding principles such as zoning, land-use and transportation policies. The construction of the Towers ultimately stalled when it was discovered that there was not sufficient access to water or electrical lines to service the building. Even more problematic, the construction site is surrounded by narrow one-way streets that would have been unable to accommodate traffic for an underground parking structure.

In 2018—seven years after the proclamation of the project’s imminent completion—the Towers stand half-built and the work site is deserted. The cranes loom over the city as if fixed in time, a liminal space of conception and incompletion. The Towers have become a monument not to a post-tribal and modern way of life, but to the entrenched system of privatized development, haphazard administrative decisions and, above all, disregard for public opinion and social welfare. The Towers is thus an unserviceable and inaccessible ruin, a relic of market-driven urbanism.

While other projects in Amman have been similarly interrupted, none stand as close to—and simultaneously as far from—completion as the Towers. Another project called Limitless Towers, for example, was composed of two towers housing apartment units and commercial space. The global holding company Dubai World—the project’s primary financier—held a groundbreaking ceremony in 2008 and began excavations. But the project never progressed beyond the excavation stage. The massive crater formed by the excavation process sits abandoned and surrounded by fading posters advertising the project.

Neoliberal Economy of Craters and Cranes

Both Hussein and ʿAbdullah II’s projects—Abu Nuseir in the 1980s and the Jordan Gate Towers in the 2000s—sought to advance a cohesive national sentiment and unified Jordanian identity. Abu Nuseir was designed to challenge communal and tribal structures, redirecting allegiances toward the state; the Jordan First Initiative urged citizens to accept without question the development of ill-planned and ill-sited projects, such as the Jordan Gate Towers. In the race to create the modern milieu, planning for projects like the Jordan Gate Towers and the Limitless Towers fell far short of achieving their goals.

These projects reflect a trend of ruination in which incompleteness or failure does not necessarily equate to economic loss—at least not for all parties. The process of neoliberalization in Amman in fact ensures financial success for the state and its oligarchic network whenever the state can appropriate public and private lands as “state domain” and then sell those properties to private developers. Even today, the state continues the dispossession of lands on the outskirts of the city that are sold for private development.

Yet the profitability of ruination can also obtain for developers. While the main investor in the Towers—the Kuwait-based Al Bayan Holding Company—has not yet turned a profit, it remains steadfast in its belief that the project will one day be completed. In 2009, Al Bayan even purchased the Municipality’s ten percent stake in the project for $10.5 million. Despite the project’s mishaps and difficulties, Al Bayan announced in May 2016 that construction would eventually resume. The financial difficulties that once halted the project became a thing of the past when financiers forgave more than $100 million in debt owed by the developers.

Rather than generating economic prosperity and urban vitality, neoliberal modernization in Amman has reinforced structures of class power, exacerbating the disparities between the elite and the middle- to-low wage earners. This growing disparity results from the undiminished power of the state in processes of private development and the network of elites that fund and facilitate these private endeavors. In this way, failed neoliberal projects—and the perverse manner in which market inefficiencies have become financially desirable—have been profitable throughout the 2000s despite being socially and developmentally detrimental.

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of neoliberal urbanization in Amman is that government officials are not held accountable for administrative decisions about planning projects. The lack of regulation has allowed both public and private lands to be appropriated for private development with no political or financial consequences. The craters and cranes of both failed and ongoing projects speckle the city, while detours along city streets divert drivers away from construction zones hidden behind temporary walls adorned with posters portraying the glimmering promise of a modern Amman. While each failed project is the expression of a promise that has not—and cannot—be kept, ʿAbdullah II’s own development agenda—and not the external pressures of conflict and refugee flows—is responsible for advancing the profitability of ruination.

Endnotes

6 The term “craters and cranes” emerged in conversation with Rami Daher, whose work also focuses on the impact of development on the physical landscape of the city.
Alexandria, City of Dispossession

Youssef El Chazli

“|n Egypt, provincial cities do not exist.” This statement by French geographer Eric Denis eloquently summarizes the relationship between Cairo—the capital city—and the rest of the country. Little seems to exist beyond Cairo, except perhaps Alexandria. In the late 1990s and during the 2000s, Egypt’s second largest city seemed to witness an effervescent moment. Large economic investments and beautification projects changed its urban features, new political groups emerged and the opening of new institutions, such as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, changed the cultural landscape. By the late 2000s, a lot was happening in Alexandria. Nevertheless, almost a decade later, very little of this moment remains. Is Alexandria, once again, lost?

Alexandria...Whose?

The history of Alexandria is often narrated by those disappointed with its fate. A vast literature advanced the image of Egypt’s “second capital” through a framework of loss, often relying on poetic imageries that reinforce a multitude of stereotypes. In a recent book paying tribute to one of Alexandria’s foremost historians, a renowned French scholar commented: Today, if we want to see Alexandria, we must either turn the pages of the books that made it into a literary monument, from the comfort of an armchair, or turn our back to the walls of concrete, slide down to the beach, and watch the horizon. The sea is here, perfect.¹

In such accounts, contemporary Alexandria does not even exist, and where it does, it ideally ought not to be seen. The city exists largely as a memory, through ephemeral traces of a glorious cosmopolitan past, one of polyglot upper classes enjoying cultured lives. These tropes infuse the historiography and the literary productions on the city while simultaneously forgetting its Arab inhabitants, who constituted the vast majority of Alexandrians, dispossessing these citizens from their city; still rather common today.

Many writings on Alexandria portray the departure (and often expulsion) of its foreign communities in the late 1950s as the beginning of its demise. Following the tripartite aggression against Egypt, the regime expelled French and British nationals and embarked on an “Egyptianization” policy in 1957.

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Combined with the internal demographic, social and economic dynamics of different foreign communities, the nationalist turn of the Egyptian regime led to a massive departure of foreigners.

While this process definitely changed the face of the city, these writings overlook a simultaneous dynamic taking its roots in the new republic established in 1953: The centralization of state power under President Gamal Abdel Nasser directly contributed to the deterioration of Alexandria’s municipal experience, particularly its autonomy. A year later, all of Egypt’s cities were incorporated into national development plans. No longer seen as living spaces for inhabitants with different needs, cities became the subject of Cairo’s gaze, with the sum of their uses and functions envisioned exclusively for the development of the nation.

The effects of these dynamics on the urban fabric and demographics were many. In an effort to further develop Alexandria as an industrial hub, the regime invested in cheaper housing for workers and redistributed buildings formerly owned by foreigners to Egyptians with lower revenues. These policies contributed to a relative social desegregation of the city. But as the city continued to grow in terms of both population and its geographic boundaries—and particularly given Egypt’s dire economic situation in the wake of the multiple military debacles of the 1960s—the central government struggled to advance Alexandria’s vision for the city. It slowly stopped intervening in its social and urban organization, leaving inhabitants to organize on their own.2 This disengagement from city planning became a common feature across Egypt.

With the changes in national economic policies put in motion by President Anwar Sadat in the mid–1970s, the differential treatment between the capital and the rest of the country became even more evident. In 1976, 37 percent of the public investment for all of Egypt were directed toward the Greater Cairo area. In the 1980s and 1990s, 78 percent of subsidized housing built in Egypt was in Cairo’s periphery (86 percent in the last three years of the 1990s).3 Alexandria did benefit from some national investment, but those numbers confirm the government’s tendency to see the city’s value exclusively in terms of national development as Egypt’s main port, as its most industrial city, and as a central summer destination for domestic tourism. Most of the foreign aid received between 1976 and 1987, for example, was invested in the improvement of the industrial zones, the port and communication infrastructure, as well as the water evacuation system, sewage and electrical infrastructure.4

By the end of the century, the government was facing several crises in resources that significantly diminished public investments overall. Alexandria, like many of Egypt’s cities, was forced to “diversify” its revenue sources. During this period, a new governor, hailed by the official press as a savior of the “Bride of the Mediterranean,” transformed Alexandria into a neoliberal laboratory.5 Mohamed Abdel Salam El-Mahgoub, a former intelligence officer who headed the governorate from 1997 to 2006, advanced a large-scale beautification project for the city. In the face of declining state revenues, he pioneered partnerships with the private sector and businessmen, which largely favored the boom of construction (and accompanying destruction) with little regard for the existing urban features of the city or the needs or desires of its inhabitants. But this period was also witness to another series of changes.

### An Odyssey of Changes

Scholarly literature widely treats the 1990s as a period of political and cultural stagnation for Egypt. Marked by intense state repression, very little seemed to be happening during this decade outside of “Islamist violence.” By comparison, the year 2000 is generally seen as a turning point in the country’s trajectory, separating the dullness of the 1990s from the roaring 2000s. This narrative emphasizes changes in the political sphere, most notably the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada. Indeed, many observers credited the rise of pro–Palestinian protests in Egypt with a fundamental transformation in politics that ultimately paved the way for the January Revolution a decade later.

In Alexandria, thousands of students protested weekly in solidarity with the Palestinians inside the Alexandria University campus and in some instances took to the streets.6 On more than one occasion, the move off campus resulted in violent confrontations with police forces, including the shooting death of student protester Mohammad Ali al-Saqqa. Yet while the pro–Palestinian movement was as strong in Alexandria as it was in Cairo, Egypt’s second city did not see the emergence of a local protest milieu. With far more outlets for political activism in Cairo, those Alexandrians interested in politics—whether as an activist, a civil servant, a journalist, or an academic—mostly made their way to Cairo to pursue these interests.7 For many years, young Alexandrians filled the ranks of Cairo’s cultural and political spaces.

In the 2000s, however, new spaces catering to the needs and desires of younger generations gradually emerged across Alexandria. Whereas leisure activities in the city were for decades largely organized along class divisions, the economic changes of the 2000s brought such new leisure sites as shopping malls, which altered the class segregation of leisure practices.8 Alexandria’s first mall opened in 1997, more than a decade after the first major mall opened in Cairo (also illustrating how investment patterns prioritized Cairo). As many more malls opened their (automated) doors to the public over the next decade, they became central to youth leisure practices across class lines, alternatives for gathering outside of the controlled and normed spaces like the street or the university campus. Malls also became central spaces for flirting and mingling between the genders.

The 2000s also saw the rise of a vibrant cultural scene in Alexandria, of which the movie Microphone (2011) gave a
glimpse. In that film, youth are seen playing music in alternative venues as well as painting graffiti on the city’s walls. Many of the actors were members of Alexandria’s cultural milieus, playing themselves in a sense. New institutions such as the Garage Jesuits Cultural Center (2000) and Gudran Center for Arts and Development (2000) gave middle-class youth (but not only them) access to new, non-consumption oriented leisure spaces and practices. The inauguration of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in 2002 was also paramount in the reshaping of local cultural milieus. While still a state-controlled institution, the new library built upon these local milieus to attract (and constitute) a public. More young Alexandrians were able to find diverse social and political outlets (including through employment, leisure activities and art courses) without having to move to Cairo. This dynamic greatly contributed to the emergence of a local Alexandrian political and cultural sphere, which played a central role in the 2011 January Revolution.

From Revolution to Devolution

During the 18-day uprising of January–February 2011, Alexandria witnessed violent clashes with the police, and protesters burned down most police stations. The city was also the first in which protesters, a few weeks later, raided the State Security Investigations’ headquarters, initiating a wave of similar actions all across the country. When the first free and democratic presidential elections were held in mid–2012, the candidates of both the Muslim Brotherhood (Mohamed Mursi) and the old regime (Ahmed Shafik) were first and second nationwide. In Alexandria, the most popular candidates hailed from the “revolutionary camp” (Hamdeen Sabahi and Abdel Moneim Abu Al-Futuh, first and second, respectively). In these first years following the uprising, a local political sphere thus emerged in Alexandria, with groups representing diverse political tendencies debating and engaging in street protest, organizing workers and advocating for diverse causes. In arts and culture, too, the city witnessed a blossoming of activities. Performances took to the streets, and cultural spaces swarmed with youth. Alexandrians even engaged in heated debates about the identity of the city, performing new forms of “Alexandrinity.” For example, some began to rediscover the Alexandrian accent and perform it constantly, whether by using Abdel Moneim Abu Al-Futuh, first and second, respectively).

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That effervescence now seems like a distant past. While spending the spring of 2017 in Alexandria, I joked with an artist and friend—paraphrasing the 1996 novel No One Sleeps in Alexandria by local writer Ibrahim Abdel Meguid—noting that no one lived in Alexandria anymore. The few activists and artists who remained now avoided the streets and public spaces. Many more left for Cairo or, if they had the opportunity, abroad. Of the new cultural institutions, many had closed or were offering only minimal services due to frozen funds and the general crackdown on literal and metaphorical spaces of expression. One of the most immediate consequences of the 2011 uprising was the general sentiment of pride that many Egyptians felt, and which translated, in practice, into reclaiming their country. Many youths who had previously sought to leave Egypt were suddenly cancelling these plans and reinvesting their energy in their cities. Alexandrians, like many other Egyptians, were (re)discovering their homes. But now, many youth seemed disillusioned with change and retreated from public engagement, and the accompanying commitment and feeling of belonging.

In short, Alexandria seems to have suffered the fate of Egypt. Social, political and even leisure spaces have been closed down or strictly monitored, activists and non-activists alike have been sent to prison and most of what the revolutionary moment had birthed has been suffocated. Much like in the late 1990s, investors and developers again hold the power in determining the shape and future of the city. Old buildings are demolished and new ones constructed in their place, catering to an ever-growing population and ever-shrinking spaces for building. More than ever, citizens’ experiences of their city are again mediated by class differences and social segregation. Authoritarian governance and the reign of private developers has contributed a dynamic of “uncontrolled expansion and limitless dreams,” dispossessing once again—and after a fleeting window of hope—the citizens from their city. If Alexandria is again becoming Egypt’s second capital, as Alexandrians like to call it, it is partly because it is looking more and more similar to Cairo.

Endnotes

7 Indeed, until very recently, studying political science was only possible at Cairo University and the American University in Cairo.

The Destructive Dreams of AKP Urbanism

Ayse Çavdar

Başakşehir is an emerging district of Istanbul that was planned by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan when he was the city’s mayor in the 1990s. Today it is part of an archipelago of privileged, upper-middle-class religious enclaves that ring Istanbul as part of an urban construction boom overseen by Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) after it became the ruling party in Turkey in 2002. As prime minister, Erdoğan promoted development projects throughout Turkey’s large cities under the framework of urban transformation. In all of these projects, the government declared a state of emergency over these areas in order to bypass laws that regulate urban planning, giving the AKP government enormous powers to transform Turkey’s urban landscape in its own self-image.

Since 2004, the AKP has overseen the production of more than 700,000 new homes through the Mass Housing Administration, which has extraordinary authority over urban planning. The AKP also subsidizes private companies to accelerate construction. Much of the new construction is geared toward building gated communities in Istanbul and other Anatolian cities. Because gated communities facilitate the privatization of municipal services, construction firms now provide these services to thousands of families. In addition, the government and the construction companies see large enclaves as profitable investments. And, since the 1960s, Islamists—including those that shape the AKP ideology—have seen gated communities such as Başakşehir as the most suitable urban form for practicing an Islamic lifestyle.

Erdoğan’s original goal in Başakşehir was to create an affordable alternative for people previously living in gecekondu (shanty) areas, populated by the poor and rural migrants produced through waves of internal migration and forced displacement from Kurdish regions in the 1990s. Yet Başakşehir’s social class profile improved significantly under Erdoğan’s neoliberal economic policies and both rapid economic advancement and its deeply religious character have made it a stronghold of the AKP and a microcosm of AKP urbanism.
For my doctoral thesis,¹ I interviewed upper-middle class religious women in Başakşehir. Most of the women are well-educated and shared stories about their efforts to resist the ban on veiling at universities in the pre-AKP period. Now, however, they do not work because the conservative ideology of the AKP suggests that a woman’s primary duty is to preserve the family. This conservative ideology functions as their bittersweet bond between their families and the AKP. In turn, they owe their upward mobility to the work and support provided to their spouses by the AKP. Beautiful houses, credit cards and secure living areas function as compensation for their sacrifices. When I was conducting interviews in 2010–2011, most of the women had been living in Başakşehir for two to three years. They moved there from either gecekondu areas or historic districts in central Istanbul that were increasingly beset by poverty and a growing list of social problems.

When asked why they chose to move to Başakşehir, religious women living in the neighborhood gave a standard answer: “We wished to live with people similar to us,” meaning religious, Turkish, Sunni and not poor. They also shared similar complaints about their former neighborhoods as being overcrowded and having too much crime, poor infrastructure and immoral people. By immorality, they meant issues such as alcohol consumption, dress codes and sexuality. Their concerns about morality did not extend to Islamic values relating to public and economic matters such as usury, rightful due (kul hakkı: the rights of others in Islam) and deference to contracts. They dismissed the violation of Islamic codes in these matters even as they discussed the difficulties of a Muslim living in a corrupt world, arguing that Muslims have to be economically strong in order to protect their morality.

Yet Başakşehir’s residents also complained about feeling bored in their new neighborhood and distant from the city and its social life. They expressed a desire to return to the city center and supported AKP government plans to build new gated communities in their old neighborhoods that would uphold the values of its version of Islam. Given my extensive religious education, I asked, “But you should protect your own ego from evil, it is not the government’s business. This is your divine exam, not the state’s. Is it not?” In response, I heard that the world is too complicated and sinful, and individual believers cannot protect themselves. “We need to get together and rebuild our cities as sin-free places. Otherwise, God will punish us badly.”

After one Qur’an recitation session with these religious women, we talked in an apartment on the tenth floor of a huge apartment block within a gated community made up of several blocks of tall buildings with identical architecture and colors. One woman said that one of the symptoms of the apocalypse is the increasing number of tall buildings. When the final day approaches, she said, people will compete to build higher and higher buildings in the cities. But, I asked, “Is it not weird that we are living in a district built in the manner described as a symptom of the apocalypse?” For a short moment of silence, nearly everyone looked out the window and reflected. One middle-aged woman broke the silence. “My daughter, the apocalypse will happen anyway, let’s enjoy our time.” Then she continued, “The Qur’an says no one can stop the apocalypse, not even the Prophet Mohammed. So, what can we do? Let’s pray we are the last generation before the apocalypse, thus our time in the grave will be shorter.”

Despite their concerns over the construction of high rise buildings, these women expressed a sense of resignation in the face of massive societal dislocations. Moreover, as the AKP grew in power, it raised many religious families from the lower-class to the middle- and upper-middle class. With that mobility came larger houses, cars, businesses, wages, credit cards, private colleges for their kids and—perhaps most importantly—stories of success that they could share with great pride.

Nevertheless, reflecting on their former neighborhoods in central Istanbul reminded them of who they were, a self-image composed of a complicated yet strongly affective amalgam of resentment, envy and humiliation which together generated a destructive, and somewhat apocalyptic, vision concerning the future of the city. I listened with surprise as they imagined new projects that would destroy and reconstruct their former neighborhoods. “I escaped from Fatih because everybody is there. There is no infrastructure, no plan. Everybody gossips about everybody. But if those current buildings are destroyed and new Ottoman neighborhoods are built, of course I would go back there. I am an urban person.”

What emerged from these discussions was the desire to cover up a secret by actively destroying its traces. The secret for the women I interviewed was their individual and collective consciousness that they were once poor and excluded, not counted among the city’s rightful inhabitants by the previous secular Kemalist regime. To cover up this secret, they imagined destroying that city and building a new one as the only way to own the city. Erdoğan was like an avatar, realizing their dreams.

The fierce protests that erupted in the area of Istanbul known as Gezi Park in June 2013 were, in part, the response by a different composition of Istanbul inhabitants to the destructive dreams of this emerging religious upper-middle class and their actualization under Erdoğan.

The Gezi Park protests were the first time that the AKP faced significant public resistance from below to their urban transformation project. The term “below” is important because the AKP’s legitimacy rests on the claim that it enjoys widespread support from below. The protests, however, revealed an alternative “below,” one that shared nothing with the AKP. Furthermore, the site of the protests—Taksim Square, Gezi Park and the surrounding streets and buildings—was the very place from which many of the pro–AKP religious upper-middle-class families of Başakşehir were fleeing to protect their morality.

Dreams Meet Resistance in Gezi Park

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Dreams of Destruction and Renewal

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Nevertheless, reflecting on their former neighborhoods in central Istanbul reminded them of who they were, a self-image composed of a complicated yet strongly affective amalgam of resentment, envy and humiliation which together generated a destructive, and somewhat apocalyptic, vision concerning the future of the city. I listened with surprise as they imagined new projects that would destroy and reconstruct their former neighborhoods. “I escaped from Fatih because everybody is there. There is no infrastructure, no plan. Everybody gossips about everybody. But if those current buildings are destroyed and new Ottoman neighborhoods are built, of course I would go back there. I am an urban person.”

What emerged from these discussions was the desire to cover up a secret by actively destroying its traces. The secret for the women I interviewed was their individual and collective consciousness that they were once poor and excluded, not counted among the city’s rightful inhabitants by the previous secular Kemalist regime. To cover up this secret, they imagined destroying that city and building a new one as the only way to own the city. Erdoğan was like an avatar, realizing their dreams.
Encountering this forgotten “below” in Taksim Square held tremendous meaning for the AKP, as that encounter resulted from Erdoğan’s plan to destroy the place’s symbolism and replace it with new symbolism.

The symbolic center of Taksim Square is the iconic Monument of the Republic with figures representing women, peasants and workers alongside Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his colleagues, who established modern Turkey from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. Pietro Canonica, an Italian sculptor, completed the monument in 1928, just five years after the proclamation of the republic. The Istanbul Municipality funded the statue via donations by citizens. The square also has symbolic importance for the left in Turkey due to a deadly May Day protest in 1977, when 35 people were trampled to death due to panic caused by gunfire, whose perpetrators were never identified. Erdoğan promised to reopen Taksim Square for May Day gatherings when he first became prime minister, and he did so for three years between 2010 and 2012. Before and after these years, however, labor unions and left organizations were banned from the square under the excuse that the site was under construction.

But it is the square’s Ottoman history and structures that have the most symbolic importance in relation to the AKP’s and Erdoğan’s dreams of urban transformation for Istanbul. In the eighteenth century, the Ottoman authorities built a structure named Maksim as the center of the water distribution system of Istanbul. Later, the Ottoman state built an army barracks called Topçu Kışlası (Artillery Barracks) nearby, on the precise spot that would become Gezi Park. The Gezi protests erupted in 2013 when Erdoğan, as prime minister, declared his intention to rebuild the Artillery Barracks on its original location.

The Ottoman Sultan Selim III originally built the Artillery Barracks in 1806 in the context of his attempts to modernize the Ottoman Army. In 1909, after the second declaration of a constitutional regime by the Ottoman state, military officers who were disillusioned with the reforms led a revolt from these barracks. As religious and conservative leaders and their followers joined the revolt, the unrest evolved into a popular reactionary movement against the government. According to the new constitution, conservative Muslims would lose their privileges under the principle of equal citizenship and would be subject to the secular rule of the Party of Union and Progress (PUP). The conservative officers and religious leaders wanted to keep Sultan Abdülhamid II in power but abolish the constitution and related military reforms. For them, the PUP was responsible for their discontent.

Although some members of the PUP government resigned, the revolt continued and many soldiers and civilians were killed. The PUP-affiliated Army of Action, based in Thessaloniki, travelled to Istanbul to suppress the revolt. Mustafa Kemal, who would go on to become the founding father of the modern Republic, was a lieutenant commander of the Army of Action. For the PUP and the Army of Action, responsibility for the uprising belonged to Abdülhamid II. They formed a new government, sent Abdülhamid II to exile in Thessaloniki and declared Mehmet Reşat Efendi the new sultan.

Following the revolt, the Artillery Barracks were abandoned and over time became an artifact of the past. After the construction of the Monument of the Republic, the Armenian community built a cemetery and a small church on a neighboring piece of land and later the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM) was built on the
site of the Artillery Barracks. Yet the Artillery Barracks remained a decrepit and almost haunted place until the French planner Henri Prost suggested that the land became a public park. The municipality destroyed the remaining barracks, and the park was named after İsmet İnönü—the strongman who ruled Turkey immediately after Mustafa Kemal—popularly known as Gezi Park.

At a symbolic level, then, restoring elements of the Ottoman-era urban landscape in Taksim Square through the destruction of Gezi Park is in keeping with Erdoğan's longstanding effort, along with the use of public money to finance books, movies, television series and exhibitions, to celebrate Abdüllahamid II as the last sublime sultan. As a political leader deploying the power of Islamic religiosity, Erdoğan's restoration of the image of Abdüllahamid II are part of his attempt to narrate his own legitimacy in terms of continuity with Turkey's Ottoman and Islamic past. For example, Erdoğan waged a battle to transform Yıldız Palace, the most prominent material legacy of Abdüllahamid II, into a presidential residence. And the proliferation of clock towers in gated communities represents a tribute to the urban modernization projects initiated by Abdüllahamid II.

The Gezi protests began as a reaction to Erdoğan's plans to destroy the park, rebuild the Artillery Barracks and convert it into a shopping mall. Once the protests began, however, others went to the park and to Taksim in order to stop the police violence against protesters. When the demonstrations spread throughout Turkey and began to widen their criticism of AKP government policies, some members of the government indicated a willingness to compromise in Taksim Square. Erdoğan, however, insisted he would rebuild the Artillery Barracks and replace the abandoned AKM with a baroque opera house.

A friend of mine working for Erdoğan's office told me that Erdoğan watched the demonstrations at least once from the Gökkaifes, a 154-meter skyscraper near Gezi Park. What could he see from that distance? How did he reflect on his image in Gezi Park, given that his portrait was imprinted on banners covering Taksim Square and the park?

After the July 2016 coup attempt, the first place that Erdoğan's supporters gathered to celebrate their victory against the coup was not in one of the new squares, Kazlıçeşme or Yenikapi, that Erdoğan had built to gather crowds for political meetings and similar events. Those squares are artificial in that they were built by filling the shoreline with debris from the neighborhoods of İstanbul destroyed as part of Erdoğan's urban transformation project. Urbanists often describe these squares as tumors of the city. Instead, religious and pro-AKP crowds gathered in Taksim Square. After a couple of days, Erdoğan organized another meeting in Yenikapi, in an effort to invent a “Yenikapi spirit,” a new and conservative spirit to defend Erdoğan's rule as the democratically elected president.

Istanbul’s Eyes

To mark the fifth anniversary of the Gezi protests in 2018, an anonymously created slogan spread through social media: “The darkness leaves; Gezi remains.” Variations on the slogan soon emerged: “Corruption goes; Gezi remains.” “Oppression goes; Gezi remains.” These slogans remind both the AKP and the broader Turkish society that the spirit of Gezi is alive. One variation of the slogan, authored by Volkan Kesanbili—“The eye goes; Gezi remains”—invokes the 36 people, including Kesanbili, who lost their eyes when police deliberately aimed tear gas canisters at the heads of protesters.

Gezi Park remains, but many changes have occurred in Taksim Square since the protests. The eerie and vacant AKM building remained for a while, just as had the Artillery Barracks in the early decades of the Republic. But once construction began on a mosque—another project initiated by Erdoğan in Taksim Square—the AKM was fully demolished.

Prior to the June 2018 elections, Erdoğan visited Taksim Square. He first viewed the construction of the mosque and later the empty place where the AKM had stood. A photograph of the second visit went viral on social media, showing Erdoğan staring at the empty lot with an expression of anxiety and anger.

Since the Gezi protests, the lost eyes of Volkan Kesanbili and others obsess me with an imaginary scene: Two persons are looking into each other’s eyes. They do not like each other; perhaps they are rivals. Neither is happy with the reflection of himself in the other’s eyes. Suddenly, one of them can no longer bear the burden of facing himself as reflected in the other’s eyes. To make the image go away, he takes out one of the eyes of his rival, becoming the perpetrator and making the other the victim.

Sometime later, the two come together once again. The victim has covered his lost eye with a patch. When the perpetrator looks at the patch over the victim’s lost eye, his reflection is nothing but the dark eye patch. The second eye of the victim is still there, but the perpetrator is obsessed with the patch—the patch that now reflects who he is and what he did. His facial expression must have been much like that of Erdoğan when he gazed upon the empty space where the AKM once stood.

The never-ending conservative discourse about how Muslims in Turkey were excluded and repressed by the secular parliamentary “ancien régime” gives rise to a mindset that seeks compensation for the past in the future. In this state of mind, the self-image of the new ruler merges with the self-image of his followers and their secret dreams to own the city through its destruction. What they do to the city represents the actualization of their wounded self-image on the urban landscape. Now, after the June 2018 elections, Erdoğan has all the authority he needs to continue Turkey’s urban transformation, and as the avatar of his enthusiastic followers, he is the only master of this wounded landscape. At least for a while, the rest, with their remaining eyes, have to confine themselves to witnessing him enact these dreams.

Endnotes

Abadan
The Rise and Demise of an Oil Metropolis

Kaveh Ehsani and Rasmus Christian Elling

In fall 1978, Abadan’s oil refinery workers played a decisive role in the Iranian Revolution by joining the national mass strikes. Just two years later, Abadan and the adjoining port city of Khorramshahr were shelled by the invading Iraqi army and effectively destroyed during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88), which scattered their population of over 600,000 as refugees across Iran and abroad. The bloody liberation of Khorramshahr (May 1982) turned the tide of Iraqi advances. Abadan’s refinery workers remarkably kept up production under constant shelling through eight years of war and international sanctions, earning the two cities a prominent place in post-revolutionary Iran’s official mythology of the “Sacred Defense.”

Despite state propaganda lionizing the workers, postwar reconstruction has not been kind to either city. Prior to the war, Khorramshahr had been Iran’s largest port, while the much larger Abadan was home to one of the world’s largest refineries. Both cities were major commercial centers in the late 1970s. A major tourist destination with posh resorts and nightclubs, cinemas and shopping centers, Abadan also boasted Iran’s second major international airport and a large bazaar. The region’s agricultural economy was booming with date plantations geared to export. Abadanis boasted of their soccer teams, leisure clubs, petroleum university, artists and prominent intellectuals.

Abadan is now a postindustrial shell of its former glory days as a beacon of modernity: a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic and progressive city that had played decisive roles in national and global events. Today’s Abadan resembles deindustrialized Detroit or Gary, the former US automobile and steel cities that fell victim to neoliberal globalization. But Abadan was also the target of military invasions, failed postwar reconstruction and ecological crises caused by global warming and human folly.

Three decades after the ceasefire with Iraq, the rubble has been largely cleared away and the population is back to the

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pre-revolution levels, surpassing 300,000 in Abadan and its rural surroundings (Iran’s population increased from 34 to 80 million during the same period). But the city is plagued by environmental, social, demographic and economic crises. Critical air and water pollution, chronic high unemployment, widespread corruption in the public and financial sectors, ethnic and political discrimination and perceptions of state failure to deliver tangible improvements and long-term development have created a constant state of discontent. The disjuncture between official rhetoric and lived reality and the recognition that poor policies are responsible for the crises have created a sense of abandonment and a politics of despair that regularly erupts into riots.3

If Abadan once epitomized cosmopolitan urban modernity, it has come to embody an opposite imaginary of dystopia underpinned by a melancholic nostalgia for a modernity that is in the past and a future that holds no promise except of further decline.

Urban Politics of Oil and Modernity

The story of Abadan is entwined with the turbulent histories of modernity in Iran, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. From its foundation on a sandy island in the Shatt al-'Arab River bordering Iran and Iraq on the eve of World War I, the city has been at the center of momentous events of global significance, shaped by imperialism, nation building and power struggles over oil.

Middle East oil was first discovered in 1908 in the Zagros mountains of southwest Iran. The British government became the majority shareholder in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC, today BP) in violation of the concession granted in 1901 by Mozaffar ad-Din Shah to an Australian businessman. The decision to build a major refinery in Abadan to supply Britain’s war machine was made on the eve of World War I. While the industrial infrastructure was still being assembled, APOC attempted in vain to control and manage a growing population of migrants and refugees, as did the Iranian government in its later effort to impose control over the city.

Abadan’s vast industrial workforce was made up of expatriate Europeans, Indian migrants recruited from outposts of the British Empire, dispossessed and proletarianized Bakhtiyari and Arab tribesmen and Iranians coming from as far as the oil fields of the Caucasus after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The urban politics of Abadan was thereafter shaped by relentless struggles over the right to the city—of living and working conditions and management of social and political life—between the oil company in its various permutations;4 the autocratic central government; and the growing population developing novel forms of collective resistance and advancing its own claims and demands. Workers in the refinery, port, railways and factories were under constant surveillance and control by employers, but they found support among the general population of the city for their attempts to address social and political concerns.

These entanglements made Abadan synonymous with oil and all the violent paradoxes and revolutionary transformations associated with it. The establishment of the massive complex of oil extraction and refining in southwest Iran was based on the forcible dispossession of local tribal and agrarian populations, but it also led to the emergence of new urban solidarities among destitute migrants living in the slums of the new oil cities. This new urban geography of oil was characterized by shocking disparities of wealth despite monumental infrastructure development that spurred new models of urban management elsewhere in the country. The oil complex created tremendous pollution and ecological degradation, but this was juxtaposed to manicured European garden-city neighborhoods, segregated social clubs and modern amenities like hospitals, schools and workers’ housing estates.

Oil cities like Abadan suffered from heavy-handed corporate rule and constant police-state surveillance and repression, but they also became sites of labor activism, radical politics, and grassroots popular movements. Although highly segregated by class, race and occupation, ethnic and cultural intermingling along with the industrial labor market and urban economy created a cosmopolitan environment where new solidarities emerged to resist discrimination and injustice.5

By the 1960s new technologies, urban planning practices and consumer products entered Iran through Abadan, with the city giving rise to innovations in fashion, lifestyle and popular culture. Through films, newspapers and posters, the Pahlavi state produced an official image of Abadan as the epitome of Fordist development, where hardworking families could enjoy prosperity and suburban comfort in the shadow of the oil complex.

Revolution, War and the Aftermath

The image of Abadan as a vanguard city of oil-driven modernity was transformed by its role in the 1979 revolution and then shattered by the war that followed. Although the Iranian oil industry had been nominally nationalized in 1973, logistic and technical operations remained under the effective control of multinationals. In late summer and autumn of 1978, Iranian oil workers joined the popular call for a mass strike and effectively shut down operations across the sector. The strikers’ main political demands were the full nationalization of the oil industry and the expulsion of all multinational oil companies and the thousands of expatriates who held key positions in technical, managerial and industrial operations. The strike dealt a fatal symbolic and economic blow to the monarchy.6

The city’s destruction in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion and the scattering of its population were part of a major political turning point that allowed the Islamic Republic to consolidate its monopoly over post-revolution politics in Iran. Like most of Iran’s war-damaged western frontier, Abadan’s commercial economy and its industrial heart—the harbor, oil refinery, steel mill and petrochemical plant—were never
fully rebuilt after the 1988 ceasefire, in part due to the lack of a permanent peace treaty with Iraq. The main hubs of the Iranian oil industry moved elsewhere, and the once vibrant river commerce that had sustained major ports in Khorramshahr, Abadan and Basra in Iraq is today all but moribund.\(^7\)

Moreover, ill-conceived and poorly executed development projects, including massive dams, sugarcane agribusinesses and water transfer schemes, have caused critical water shortages and pollution throughout the Khuzestan Province. The reservoir of the Gotvand dam on the Karun river, for example, has salt deposits that have spoiled the country’s largest river and main source of drinking water for Abadan, Ahvaz and Khorramshahr. In June 2018, Khuzestan’s representative in the Provincial Higher Council warned of the catastrophic consequences of the province’s water situation by stating that “Karun has become a flowing sewer.” A Majlis representative from Bushehr warned of possible water wars, saying that “our society is on the verge of disintegration.”\(^8\) Significant regional environmental chemical contamination caused by three major wars has further exacerbated the situation.

The damming and indiscriminate diversion of upstream rivers by all riparian countries—Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria—has led to the catastrophic draining of the vast marshlands of southern Iraq and Iran. The resulting desertification has led to widespread displacement of populations and recurring dust storms that appear apocalyptic in scale and intensity. The critical state of air quality caused by salt, dust and harmful chemicals has caused the frequent closing of schools, offices and power plants. The poor air quality is also blamed for the rise of chronic health problems in Abadan. Global warming has further exacerbated the crisis, with temperatures rising as high as 130°F. Some climate scientists warn that average temperatures may rise to levels that make the entire Persian Gulf uninhabitable.\(^9\)

Amidst these dire circumstances, displaced people who returned after the war to rebuild Abadan barely hang on in a dispiriting atmosphere of neglect and discontent. Even the establishment of the Arvand Free Zone, a large-scale industrial and commercial enclave aimed at reviving the moribund local economy, has failed to generate the kind of progress envisioned in official promotional material. Following the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, Petroleum Minister Bijan Namdar Zangeneh promised that the lifting of international sanctions would finally reverse the decline of Abadan and Khuzestan by ushering in new capital investments. His predictions have proven hollow, as the city and the oil rich province have continued down the spiral of decline and despair.\(^10\)

**Conflicting Imaginaries of Past and Future**

To many Iranians, and particularly those in the diaspora, Abadan is remembered through nostalgic narratives that gloss
over the gross inequalities, injustices and discrimination that marred the city under British influence and Pahlavi rule. In these romanticized narratives, Abadan’s past is framed as a near utopia of peaceful conviviality. Its former status as a symbol of material progress and affluence reemerges in online communities where past and current residents share pictures, postcards and memories associated with the heyday of the oil city. In this postwar “utopia lost” narrative, Abadan’s history seems to stop sometime around the revolution and the Iraqi invasion; everything later is a story of loss, displacement, repression and abandonment.

Conversely, the post-revolution state’s official narrative about Abadan begins at that historical moment: the heroic uprising of oil workers during the revolution, the epic resistance of local volunteer militias and, later, the organized forces of the Islamic Republic fighting foreign aggressors. In this official narrative, the loss of the city is a saga of the forces of good, besieged and embattled but ultimately emerging victorious from the flames of war.

Yet given the intense discontent of the local population, there are signs that the state is searching for a more constructive and mollifying narrative than its official discourse of a heroic city victimized by an unjust war. In 2016, the state opened its first Petroleum Museum, a collection of commemorative sites across Abadan’s industrial landscape including the country’s first gas station and a restored art deco masterpiece that has been turned into an open air exhibition. The museum runs an online project to document the cultural, social and technical history of oil in Iran. Several other landmark buildings have come under national heritage protection, and the local tourist office has rebranded the city. These official projects aim to reclaim the paradoxical heritage of a turbulent past that has otherwise been kept alive by amateurs and ordinary citizens through documents, oral histories of Abadan and crowdsourced visual materials shared on social media, weblogs and other online forums.11

The rebranding of Abadan is part of a broader attempt to close the ideological gap between official rhetoric in the Islamic Republic and the nationalist nostalgia of a younger generation longing for a mythologized pre-revolutionary past.12 That rebranding is a symbolic (and hardly adequate) response to Abadanis widespread sense of betrayal and abandonment regarding the failed promises of reconstruction. Abadan is, in other words, an important front in the battle of clashing public visions about the past, present and future of Iran.

In the global North, the degradation of post-industrial urban environments can provide unexpected opportunities. In Detroit, some vacant spaces have been repurposed for Islamic Republic and the nationalist nostalgia of a younger generation longing for a mythologized pre-revolutionary past. The rebranding of Abadan is part of a broader attempt to legitimize neoliberal exploitation in the guise of righteous, resentful patriotism. Former Indiana Governor Mike Pence, for example, rode a policy of law-and-order political backlash against the impoverished, minority population in the city of Gary to the position of vice president of the United States.

But in the more precarious national environments of the global South, post-industrial urban residents and policymakers face even greater systemic challenges, both local and international. Despite appearing to embrace a brighter version of Abadan’s past, the Iranian state has yet to create substantial change in the life of the city today. Chronic unemployment, environmental crises, widespread poverty, meager economic activity and perceptions of official corruption are everyday realities for Abadanis. The government’s acknowledgment in its recent cultural policies that the city’s heyday was in the past has only highlighted Abadan’s miserable present. At the same time, the traumatic decline of a cosmopolitan industrial city that once embodied the promises and perils of oil-fueled modernity has altered the perceptions of what collective futures can be built on a lost and idealized past. The major challenge facing the new generation of Abadanis and other Iranians is whether the nostalgic memories of Abadan’s social and political past can again inspire grassroots movements and hopeful possibilities for the city as well as the nation.

Author’s Note: We are grateful to Norma Claire Moruzzi and MER editors for their critical feedback. This essay is dedicated to our many Abadani friends and comrades who continue the difficult struggle to keep alive the dream of the city, its past but also its future.

Endnotes
2 The nostalgia of this lost belle époque is captured in the memoirs collected and analyzed in Rasmus Christian Elling, The Abadan Times: https://abadantimes.com/tag/rasmus-christian-ellings/
4 First APOC, later Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, then the consortium of multinationals that took charge after the 1953 coup d’état and finally the National Iranian Oil Company after the nationalizations of the 1970s.
7 Nida Alahmad and Arang Keshavarzian, “A War on Multiple Fronts,” Middle East Report 257 (Winter 2010).
8 BBC Persian, June 16, 2016 and June 27, 2016.
10 “Petroleum Minister’s Promise to Develop Khuzestan Once Sanctions Are Lifted,” BBC Persian, October 18, 2011.
Generational Dislocations
One Hundred Years of Displacement in a Beirut Suburb

Joanne Randa Nucho

Since 2011, violence in Syria has worsened the widespread displacement of people in the Middle East and destroyed several cities. The images of displaced Syrian families fleeing to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon broadcast around the world had a haunting resonance. Archival photographs of Armenian refugee camps in Aleppo from one hundred years ago are today echoed by images of Syrian refugee camps across the southern Turkish border. With war comes layers of displacement as migration changes the social and physical fabric of both cities from which people are displaced as well as cities in which they have resettled. Sometimes these displacements are generationally repeated by members of the same family. Many of the Armenians of Aleppo, for example, are descendants of people displaced by the Armenian genocide of the early twentieth century; less than 100 years later, they are again being displaced to other cities.

The migration of families across generations, often prompted by violent conflict, has consequences for spatial practices of memory and commemoration. Bourj Hammoud, a Beirut suburb which has long been a hub for migration and displacement, exemplifies how the destruction of cities and communities are remembered in and through urban space. While people commemorate the loss of places to which they may never return, they also creatively rebuild a sense of home where they live today and potentially for generations after. The practice of constructing community in the aftermath of displacement is built into the fabric of cities like Bourj Hammoud, even as the Lebanese war of the 1970s and 1980s brought more displacement to its residents. The city is a palimpsest, with each new wave of displaced people creating their own sense of belonging in its narrow streets and alleyways. The feeling of being home becomes especially important as temporary displacements seem more permanent with each passing year.

Bourj Hammoud is widely regarded as Beirut’s Armenian neighborhood, built by survivors of the Armenian genocide of 1915–1919. It is home to a diverse population of migrants and displaced people from within Lebanon and beyond, including waves of displacement from Syria since 2011. Until the early twentieth century, the land just east of the Beirut River was a marshy agricultural area. During a century of war and imperial conquest, Bourj Hammoud evolved into a densely populated suburb built by migration, displacement and movement. The neighborhood is a place where overlapping histories of...
displacement are made visible in urban spaces, from murals and graffiti with calls for recognition of the Armenian genocide to the enduring presence of the last remaining Armenian refugee camp, Sanjak Camp, with its cinder-block shacks and corrugated metal roofs. Reminders of the humble origins of this neighborhood built to house the displaced are everywhere in the narrow streets and small two-story buildings that were built in the 1930s. Some neighborhoods are named after towns that the displaced were forced to leave behind.

In a city dense with Armenian schools, churches, social welfare centers and clinics, Armenian is heard on nearly every street and Armenian music echoes through its alleys. Some of its inhabitants speak a dialect of Armenian that is unmistakably of Bourj Hammoud, others Aleppine. The sensory experience is an immersion in a visual landscape that evokes memories of displacement and also a rich soundscape. Western Armenian was taught in Armenian schools in cities like Beirut, Bourj Hammoud and Aleppo. It is mostly spoken by the descendants of Armenians who survived the genocide, even though some of their great-grandparents may not have used Armenian in their hometowns. Bourj Hammoud is a dynamic response to those displacements, sustained through informal and formal organizing by town associations and political parties. Resilience, as much as dislocation, has defined Bourj Hammoud across the generations.

A City of Other Cities

The Middle East experienced a wide-scale refugee crisis in the wake of the Armenian Genocide and World War I. In the 1920s, French Mandate officials resettled in Lebanon a significant number of Armenians fleeing genocide. Some refugees ended up in camps like Karantina in Beirut, a place now synonymous with the right-wing Phalangist massacre of Palestinians in that camp during the 1970s.

In the 1930s, French Mandate officials helped Armenian town associations—organized by displaced people from places like Adana, Sis and Marash—to pool resources and purchase plots of land. These plots would later become the municipality of Bourj Hammoud. Many of the area’s neighborhoods still carry the names of the Ottoman town associations that purchased plots, such as Nor Marash, Nor Adana and Nor Sis (New Marash, New Adana and New Sis). In those years, town associations kept Armenian refugee communities together as they resettled in Beirut, enabling refugees to maintain connections with their home cities. In the aftermath of the genocide that left families disconnected by death or disappearance the town associations served as anchors for community, reinforced by new urban developments.

Nearly a century later, descendants of the original inhabitants do not view these names as placeholders. As with other neighborhoods that reference migration histories—for example, Little Tokyo in Los Angeles—the place takes on new meaning through layers of representation and accumulated memories. Armenian schools, political parties and social organizations operating within the confessional political space of the new Lebanese state have shaped notions of Armenian community and belonging. Within the working-class urban space of Bourj Hammoud, these communities slowly fostered a sense of identity connected to imaginaries of a global Armenian diaspora, while also being particular to Lebanon.

More Waves of Displacement

The mid-twentieth century brought more displacement and migration. By the 1940s, many Armenians in Lebanon had answered the call to “repatriate” to Soviet Armenia even though it was not a “return” for people displaced from cities and villages that had been incorporated into the Republic of Turkey. Those Armenians who emigrated to the Soviet Union sold their properties which became available to new migrants.

By 1976, the right-wing Christian Phalange militia and its allies had forced Shiite and Palestinian inhabitants to leave the neighborhood known as Naba’a, which grew until the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s.

During the 1970s, Bourj Hammoud also became an important site for Shiite political organizing and social welfare provision. The wartime destruction of Beirut and the ethnic cleansing of its neighborhoods affected every part of the city. By 1976, the right-wing Christian Phalange militia and its allies had forced Shiite and Palestinian inhabitants to leave the neighborhood and others moved to the now empty apartments. When the war ended in the 1990s and property owners returned, some squatters were able to buy the properties and become legal title holders. Some of the original owners, however, reclaimed their properties and returned after a generation living elsewhere.

With the restoration of property to original owners, Naba’a again has a thriving, but smaller, Shiite community. Many properties became available for rent, creating possibilities for new migrations and social dynamics. Naba’a’s relatively affordable apartments favorably located near Beirut have been rented for decades to Syrian and Kurdish migrant workers, with small businesses catering to the growing population. The neighborhood provides a locus of community and access to kinship and hometown networks with other migrant workers from places like Qamishli. Small shops sell mobile phones as well as CDs of Kurdish and Syrian popular music. Occasionally, one might see photographs of Kurdish political figures taped to windows or walls, as well as the flags and symbols of different political parties.
The Syrian conflict created another major wave of displacement to Bourj Hammoud. According to the UNHCR, 5.6 million refugees have fled Syria, 1 million of whom are in Lebanon. Because Lebanon has prohibited the construction of formal refugee camps by international organizations, some displaced Syrians live in informal camps while others have moved into precarious housing in cities and towns.

Syrian Armenians, especially from Aleppo, are also increasingly moving to Bourj Hammoud and elsewhere in Lebanon. In the early twentieth century, Aleppo welcomed Armenians displaced by the Armenian genocide and became an important center of Armenian life, with thriving schools, churches and social organizations. It is also one of the few cities where Western Armenian, the dialect of most Armenians in the Middle East (outside of Iran and the Republic of Armenia), is taught in schools. According to human rights lawyer Harout Ekmanian, Aleppo has been an important center for Armenian language training for teachers serving the entire diaspora.

Because many Syrian Armenians descend from genocide survivors, the loss of Aleppo prompted a double displacement. Strategies to provide assistance for the displaced have re-activated institutional responses by organizations active 100 years ago. The Armenian General Benevolent Union, founded in Egypt in 1906, has established a Humanitarian Emergency Relief Fund for Syrian Armenians and raised $5 million for those displaced. Institutional and organizational echoes also exist in grassroots strategies initiated by the displaced. For instance, Aleppine Armenians living in the Republic of Armenia have established the Aleppo Compatriotic Union. The tradition of organizing by forming town associations is emerging again at a time of renewed violence and the destruction of a city to which their grandparents and great-grandparents were displaced 100 years ago.

In Bourj Hammoud, rising rents and an inability to earn a living wage in occupations such as shoe manufacturing have made life difficult for Syrian–Armenians and Lebanese–Armenians alike. What Bourj Hammoud has to offer, however, is a close-knit web of Armenian–run clinics, schools and welfare organizations. These organizations, like the Armenian Relief Cross in Lebanon, have been operating in Bourj Hammoud and in Lebanon for decades. Still, for many Syrians, Armenians and non–Armenians alike, the journey to Lebanon to escape the violence in Syria has resulted in growing economic insecurity. Many hope to return to cities like Aleppo, but have little sense of when that might happen.

Similar changes affect Kurds in Naba’a. Before 2011, most Kurdish residents were single men who had come to work as migrant laborers. Afterward, entire families who would not otherwise have come to Lebanon have migrated. Kurds have felt comfortable displaying expressions of Kurdish identity and posters and flags, because of the presence of Kurds prior to the conflict. Naba’a has become a space that represents the diversity of Kurdish communities and movements.

For nearly a century, Bourj Hammoud has witnessed multiple layers of displacement. The strategies through which this city was built and the place names that mark its neighborhoods convey how people cope with the destruction and permanent loss of their cities. Physical reminders of the genocide, such as slogans painted on walls demanding recognition of the genocide by Turkey, as well as Armenian flags and flags of the prominent political party Tashnak, make up the visual landscape of everyday life.

Nor Marash in Bourj Hammoud, however, is not only a reminder of the original Ottoman town of Marash. It is also the sound of Armenian music echoing in the streets mixed with servees taxis honking incessantly. It is about the lived experience of walking into stores and being able to speak the unique local dialect of Armenian, of knowing most shop owners personally, of knowing the streets of this small, dense city by memory. The mundane experiences of daily life leave an imprint. As many born in these neighborhoods have immigrated to the United States and Canada, the meaning of these places has shifted again. They are home to people who have always lived there, not just a copy of someplace else. The town associations that built Bourj Hammoud still exist as organizations in cities around the world where descendants of the original inhabitants have moved. At an event I attended in southern California for one of these associations, attendees from Lebanon recounted stories of the original city passed down from parents and grandparents. They often slipped, however, between those stories and their own memories from neighborhoods like Bourj Hammoud, the nor (new) city where those present were born and grew up. These nor places were described in moving terms as places of origin.

The large-scale displacements of the twentieth century have been met with further waves of disruption and loss in this century. Bourj Hammoud is one small city within the region that reflects these waves of displacement both within Lebanon and transnationally. This densely populated city has seen ethnic cleansing, transnational migration, war and displacement. Sadly, the Syrian crisis is a new chapter. Yet Bourj Hammoud has again become a place where people regroup and reimagine home, advocate for their families and wonder whether they might ever be able to return home.

### Endnotes

6. I owe this ethnographic insight to Jared McCormick.
Over the course of generations of conquest, what has been lost in colonial cities like Jerusalem? Israel’s settler-colonial project has been premised on a set of racial and spatial assumptions that require the dispossession—even the elimination—of the native Palestinians. Over the seven decades of Israeli rule in Jerusalem and throughout historic Palestine, the state has produced abiding landscapes of loss for Palestinians, while enabling mass Zionist settlement on lands and in homes wrested from the indigenous population.

Israel’s almost ineluctable expansion as well as the fortification of its exclusive character underscores why settler colonialism must be seen not as a single, seminal event of conquest but rather as an ongoing process of violent ordering and reordering. Over the last 70 years of Israeli governance, Jerusalem has been reconfigured geographically and demographically through policies designed to construct Jewish settlements on the ruins of destroyed Arab neighborhoods and villages. Analyzing the moving edge of Israeli colonialism across an urban center radically reconfigured since 1948 reveals the steady, grinding violence of settler-colonial urbanism.

Continuities of Colonial Urbanism

The fate of Deir Yassin in 1948 and Khan al-Ahmar in 2018, two Arab villages in the Jerusalem area, offer insights into the state’s enduring racial and spatial designs. These two sites lie roughly 20 kilometers apart, on opposite edges of what has become a sprawling conurbation under sole Israeli control. This region, known among Israeli planners as “Greater Jerusalem,” is much larger than the official municipal boundaries, redrawn unilaterally by the Israeli state in 1967. Deir Yassin and Khan al-Ahmar also bookend, temporally, the expropriation of this rapidly expanding colonial city.
In the early 1940s, Zionists and Palestinians understood the strategic and demographic significance of Deir Yassin, located just west of Jerusalem’s British-drawn municipal boundaries. Bringing the village under Israeli control and expelling its Palestinian residents would allow the Zionist movement to establish a territorial link between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the two cities most critical to the nascent Israeli state.

Those familiar with the history of Palestine/Israel are generally aware that on April 9, 1948, weeks before the creation of Israel, Zionist forces massacred at least 107 Palestinian inhabitants of Deir Yassin. This violent incursion (one of several massacres that year) helped ignite an exodus of tens of thousands of Palestinians from the Jerusalem area and far beyond. What is less well known, however, is that in the years immediately following the expulsion of the Palestinians and the creation of Israel, the commandeered lands of Deir Yassin and a string of neighboring Arab communities, such as Ein Karem, Lifta, Malih and Al-Walaja, were used to establish the western edge of the enlarged Israeli municipality of West Jerusalem.

The racist violence integral to colonial conquest radically transformed the land and was, in turn, celebrated as the noble work of “reclaiming” and “redeeming” Eretz Yisrael for the Jewish people. Israeli officials and their supporters abroad began to generate narratives that, paradoxically, depicted Jerusalem as the Jewish people’s “immutable” and “eternal” capital, while the Israeli state simultaneously altered its urban landscape quite radically to serve the needs of its Jewish citizens.

Moving Edge of Israeli Colonial Expansion

On the western rim of Jerusalem’s protean metropolitan area, Israeli settler colonialism was enabled by the forced removal of Palestinians in 1948. After the state’s conquest of East Jerusalem in 1967, a more challenging impediment threatened the central Zionist aim of demographic dominance. In the wake of the 1967 war, Israel did not take possession of the thousands of emptied Arab homes and abundant lands seized from refugees, as it did in 1948. Instead, the roughly 60,000 Palestinians of East Jerusalem overwhelmingly remained in their homes and deepened their commitment to national liberation and anti-colonial resistance. Appropriating and reordering the east side has required, therefore, newfangled methods of colonial governance.

Concerted efforts to defuse what Zionists have termed the Palestinian “demographic time bomb,” have always been a critical dimension of post-1967 colonial rule in Jerusalem. Several Israeli urban planners have detailed how the new rulers sought to implement, among other things, policies to “cap” the Palestinians at no more than 28 percent of the city’s population. Israeli officials unilaterally redrew Jerusalem’s municipal borders to facilitate this vision, expanding the former Jordanian-administered city tenfold. The aim, as former Israeli city planner Sarah Kaminkar noted, was to take in a maximum amount of Arab land but a minimum of Arab population. The state also carried out plans to move tens of thousands of Jewish settlers into fortress hilltop settlements built on expropriated Palestinian territory in East Jerusalem. Demographic changes would, it was thought, strengthen Israeli claims to the enlarged urban area. Despite everything that Israel has done in Jerusalem since 1967, however, today the roughly 205,000 Israeli Jews in East Jerusalem are still outnumbered by more than 320,000 Palestinians. This has jeopardized Israel’s abiding racial and spatial designs for the Jerusalem metropolitan area. This context of widespread racial anxieties among Zionists and renewed political challenges to the Zionist colonization of Palestine characterizes the Israeli state’s planned destruction of Khan al-Ahmar.

Israeli governments since 1967—and especially since the Oslo agreements were signed in 1993—have viewed the predominantly working poor Bedouin inhabitants of Khan al-Ahmar much as Zionist settlers of the Yishuv regarded Deir Yassin in the late 1940s. Indeed, the significance of this small hamlet rests precisely in the fact that it does not lie within the current Israeli-defined boundaries of Jerusalem. Situated about ten kilometers east of the existing municipal border, Khan al-Ahmar and several other communities are located in an area targeted for settler colonial expansion which Israeli planners and politicians have come to define as the “E-1” zone. The Israeli state plans to incorporate this area of about 12 square kilometers into a “Greater Jerusalem” under sole Israeli control and is laboring in real time to actualize this expanded version of its “eternal capital” through projects such as the destruction of Khan al-Ahmar. Although Israel has not yet built its prodigious “separation wall” around E-1, the planned route of the barrier would encircle E-1 and fortify its incorporation into colonial Jerusalem.

The Palestinian inhabitants of Khan al-Ahmar have struggled to remain on their land. In July 2018, they successfully—though temporarily—resisted their violent removal and “relocation,” along with other displaced Bedouin communities, to a site near a municipal garbage dump. The Bedouin of Khan al-Ahmar may soon join that minority of Palestinian refugees who have been expelled from their homes not once but two or three times since 1948. In the early 1950s, the Israeli state ejected this semi-nomadic community from the Negev Desert where they had lived for generations before Zionist settlement in Palestine. They sought refuge in the area that Israeli officials have now deemed E-1, east of Jerusalem. Much like Deir Yassin, which lay strategically between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, this now partially demolished village sits along the trajectory of settlement that Israel envisions will link its “eternal capital” to the Jordan Valley.

In March 2017, Israeli authorities declared the modest homes of Khan al-Ahmar and the school that residents built of tires and mud as merely a collection of “illegal” and “unrecognized” structures. The thick mesh of bureaucratic and legal restrictions imposed on the community for decades permits the occupying power to evict them on the pretext that it is the occupied who are unlawfully present and encroaching on Israeli “state land.”

In the Jerusalem of the future, gerrymandered lines on a map will likely no longer be sufficient to represent the city’s new borders. Rather, fortified walls and iron-clad separation,
once proposed by the ideological predecessors of Israel's current rulers, will almost certainly be the mechanism through which the E-1 territory is incorporated into an expansive Jerusalem and, therefore, the Israeli state.

Just as the massacre at Deir Yassin and the expulsion of its Palestinian survivors enabled Israel to expand the boundaries of West Jerusalem after 1948, Khan al-Ahmar and other Bedouin communities in the region are vital for Israel's colonial push eastward towards the Jordan River. By expropriating the territory of Khan al-Ahmar and other nearby Arab areas, Israel will bisect the West Bank into separate northern and southern sections, effectively preventing the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state.

In the context of negotiations with the Palestinians since the late 1990s, successive Israeli governments have expressed the Israeli state's commitment to the settlement of E-1 and its incorporation into Jerusalem. From the Camp David talks in 2000, to those in Taba in 2001, to those advanced by the Olmert government in 2008, every Israeli government has insisted that the entire area of E-1—not to mention the illegal Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem—is non-negotiable.

Conclusion

The Trump administration’s decision to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018 was premised on the refusal to acknowledge Palestinian rights to the city. That act, however, may portend a far more serious outcome. After the Bush and Obama administrations quietly precluded Israeli officials from finalizing their plans in E-1, the Trump regime appears to be encouraging the Knesset’s most racist visionaries and their settler shock troops to make “Greater Jerusalem” a reality.

The question of Jerusalem’s political status has always begged a more fundamental question: How has the racial state used its power to define, map and rearrange the contours of the city? Throughout the shifting metropolitan area, the theft of Palestinian land, homes and other property has been integral to creating the Jerusalem of the dominant Zionist imagination.

The losses of Palestinians once residing in Khan al-Ahmar, Deir Yassin and so many other sites of expulsion throughout the Jerusalem region are the precondition for an Israeli racial project actualized through settler-colonial conquest. The eastward expansion of “Greater Jerusalem” will foreclose the possibility of a Palestinian state in the West Bank. Rather than leading inevitably to a single democratic state, the death of the two-state solution may very well be consolidating apartheid as the terminal phase of the Zionist settler-colonial project.

Endnotes

1 See the 1976 Koenig Report, written by the then Israeli interior minister. In 2003, Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu referred to the mere presence of growing Palestinian populations under Israeli rule as a “demographic threat.” Gideon Alon and Ahul Benn, “Netanyahu: Israel’s Arabs are the Real Demographic Threat,” Haaretz, December 13, 2003.


3 Personal interview with Sarah Kaminker, June 1997.

“Mosul Will Never Be the Same”
An Interview with Omar Mohammed

In June 2014, the self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) launched an assault on the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Within days, the Iraqi army collapsed and ISIS proclaimed its sovereignty over the city. An anonymous blog named Mosul Eye began reporting on life under ISIS rule. With details about daily life alongside social and historical analysis, Mosul Eye documented the transformations that ISIS imposed on Mosul—including the expulsion of Shiites and Christians, the enslavement of Yazidis, strict gender segregation, rape, torture and executions—as well as the impact of air strikes by the US, Turkish, and Iraqi militaries. Coalition forces defeated ISIS in July 2017. Five months later, historian Omar Mohammed revealed that he was the anonymous Mosul Eye. MERIP Editorial Committee member Andy Clarno spoke to him by phone on May 22, 2018.
Could you begin by speaking about the processes that created the conditions for ISIS to gain power in Mosul?

Before I speak of this, let me say something important. Mosul wasn’t destroyed in 2014. Mosul has been systematically destroyed since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. But there is a difference between destruction by a terrorist group like ISIS and destruction by a government.

After World War I, the British succeeded in having the city recognized as part of Iraq. Many Ottoman buildings were demolished—first under the British Mandate and later under King Faisal. This destruction became a pattern. Every new government tried to hide or demolish what was left by the former government. After 1958, the new republican government destroyed symbols of British and Hashemite power in Mosul. And when the Baath Party came to power in 1968, they wanted to demolish symbols of the royal and republican regimes. So, Mosul wasn’t destroyed in 2014.

With ISIS, the destruction was more obvious because they destroyed buildings, historical sites and the whole history of the city. This was the last stage of destruction.

What was happening that created the conditions for ISIS to gain power in Mosul?

Back in the 1990s, Saddam’s regime began what is known as the Faith Campaign, which sought to build support for the regime through a more open embrace of salafi Islam. Northwest Mosul was an important base of Salafism. South of Mosul is another area where Salafism was growing quickly because this kind of ideology—Salafism, Wahhabism or extremism—found a perfect environment to flourish.

Saddam gave tribal sheikhs from these regions power in the city, power over the urban population. And with that power, they brought extremism into the city. Over time, Mosul became a more tribal city. There was no longer any need to go to the courts because sheikhs would resolve problems through a kind of reconciliation between tribal leaders.

Historically, Mosul had conservative religious beliefs, but it was Sufi. Sufism was part of our societal traditions, and politically it wasn’t extremist. If we remained with the old Sufism, we wouldn’t have ISIS. But when Saddam brought Salafism to Mosul, everything changed.

Mosul was a city that used to celebrate the coexistence of diverse cultures, a city that had Christians, Yazidis, Sunnis, Shiites, Arabs, Kurds, liberals and women who didn’t wear the hijab or niqab. All of this changed as the city became more conservative, more salafi.

After the US invasion in Iraq in 2003, all of the tribal sheikhs, Baath Party officials and salafi leaders in the city lost power. This was the context for the emergence of a second generation of salafi leaders. They weren’t with the tribes that supported Saddam. They included former members of the Baath Party, including military commanders and soldiers who lost their jobs. This Salafism was more highly organized than before. In 2004, we saw the first attacks against the US Army in Mosul. By mid–2004, we began to hear about al-Qaeda in Iraq and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

After the US invasion, those who opposed al-Qaeda and Salafism left Mosul, leaving it abandoned. When I say Mosul, I mean the city with a civilian government, a social structure and coexistence. That city couldn’t survive. Conflict began to arise between tribes, but Mosul was in the hands of the jihadis by 2005. By then, it was normal to see the name of al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. Death became normal. It’s sad, but if a day went by and we didn’t see a corpse in the street, a dead body, a beheaded man or a burnt car, we would say: What happened? Why didn’t anything happen today?

Was ISIS already collecting taxes at that time?

Not very much. They were more focused on oil because trucks were moving oil from Mosul to Syria and Kurdistan. This was their main source of income.

The civil war that flared up in Iraq from 2006 to 2008 gave the jihadis more reasons to recruit people. In 2010, their power decreased because of a government offensive. At that time, the eastern part of Mosul was safer because it was completely controlled by the government. But there was trouble in the western part of the city, where ISIS had a stronger presence.

In 2011, there were a few months of peace. The number of burnt cars decreased. We were able to go to parks, to travel to Baghdad or Kurdistan, to see foreign journalists. But later that year, the US Army withdrawal from Iraq was the kiss of death for Mosul because it enabled ISIS to reemerge.

From 2011 to 2015, ISIS was collecting taxes on a daily basis. My brother, who died during the battle when a mortar shell hit his house, had to pay taxes to ISIS every month. One time, we had to pay the ISIS fighters with an Iraqi army checkpoint just ten meters away. But we couldn’t report it to the police or the army because ISIS would kill us. They already had access to the police administration. And many people who reported threats by ISIS were found dead in the street.

Overall, several processes came together to create the conditions for ISIS to take power. In addition to ISIS’s growing presence, there was increasing corruption and sectarianism within the Iraqi government and the security forces and growing conflict between the local and federal governments. The area between Mosul and Tel Afar was under the control of the Turkmen wing of ISIS, which was based in Tel Afar. In Mosul, whenever you mentioned the Turkmen—the local term was ‘Aafari, someone from Tel Afar—it necessarily meant the Islamists, because they had their foot in the city.

So ISIS didn’t occupy Mosul in June 2014, it was already occupying the city; June 2014 was simply the announcement of ISIS’s rule. The Iraqi army left so quickly because it was ready to collapse. I didn’t expect any other result. I would
have been more surprised if things took a different direction and there was peace in Mosul.

Your blog, Mosul Eye, provided an important lens into life and death in a city under ISIS rule. Looking back, can you reflect on the changes that took place in the city under ISIS—through the displacement of Christians, the enslavement of Yazidis, gender segregation, rape, execution, stoning, torture and air strikes by the United States, Turkey and the Iraqi government?

I want to be optimistic. I hope the city will restore its normal life and there will again be civil society in Mosul. But to be honest, the social structure of Mosul was completely destroyed. We will never again see the same social structure. Even if Christians decide to go back or Yazidis decide to forgive or Sunnis decide to forgive not only ISIS but also those who caused the problem, Mosul will never be the same again.

Obviously there was death and fear and distrust, yet somehow people continued living amidst the destruction. Can you talk about how people navigated the death around them while trying to create space for life and human relationships?

To talk about this, we have to understand that there were different periods under ISIS rule. ISIS applied its law gradually. Ultimately, ISIS began killing people, executing people, torturing people, beheading people. And what happened to Yazidis, Christians and Sunnis gave the people of Mosul a clear understanding of what ISIS was really about. But until the middle of September 2014, ISIS did not completely control life in the city. And people in Mosul didn’t fully understand what was going on. They were still trying to understand ISIS. And ISIS ran the city in ways that corresponded to what people wanted from government. People wanted the government to give them freedom and to end sectarianism and corruption. Most importantly, ISIS worked on providing services and jobs. Of course, this was because jobs provided people with money that ISIS could collect through taxes.

ISIS had a more effective and responsive bureaucracy than the Iraqi government. If people had problems, they would go to ISIS, and ISIS would resolve their problems. ISIS told people that they could live peacefully as long as they followed orders and didn’t work against them. Many ordinary people found that they could continue living their lives. They had services. They had their shops. They had their lives. And many people found new jobs.

Perhaps the most important thing of all (and this says a lot about ISIS and how they understood the system), ISIS
brought back the thing that had been missing since 2003: assistance to farmers. People in the western and northwestern parts of Nineveh province were able to return to their agricultural lives. Many people, especially the tribes and farmers, saw this as an opportunity. No government since 2003 had provided them with the support they needed.

**Was the agricultural crisis part of the reason so many people had moved from rural areas into the city?**

Yes.

**OK. But the first impression started to fade after a few months.**

Of course. ISIS followed a familiar pattern of oppression. They recruited spies in the community, so people stopped trusting one another. They weaponized history to advance their narrative. Then they took their terror to another level. They displaced Christians, enslaved Yazidis, killed Shiites, killed Sunnis. ISIS tried to smash the ancient bonds of coexistence between Mosul’s communities. For 4000 years, my city was a city of culture, coexistence, and life. Mosul was a city with a big heart, home to all of its children. The damage caused by ISIS was immense. Life in the Mosul that I knew came to a halt.

Many people became victims during this second period as ISIS exposed its other face. There were more executions and more rules. ISIS became more focused on extracting money and revenue. Yes, ISIS still provided jobs, but it demanded whatever income you took from your job would go back to ISIS through taxes. People also had to pay for services. You had to pay for everything. Along with oil, this was a major source of revenue for ISIS.

ISIS destroyed the history and heritage of all of Mosul’s communities. They tried to replace it with their own version of history. They forced women into captivity. They banned music. And they imposed new social classes based upon jihadist loyalty.

Before ISIS, we had the middle class, the elite, tribes and workers. All of this changed under ISIS. The new social classes were, first, as ISIS called them, the mujahideen, the fighters. They were local members of ISIS, historically known as ansar (supporters), which means people from the city who joined ISIS. They were privileged, the high class. The second class were the foreign fighters. They also had a good deal. The third class were supporters but not necessarily members of ISIS. The fourth class were the commoners, or the amma as ISIS called them: normal, ordinary people. ISIS always referred to this as the class that produced apostates, spies, jawasis. My family and I became amma. We were always suspected by ISIS and addressed as cowards.

This new class system completely changed life in Mosul. Those who had been in the middle or upper class lost everything. It no longer mattered what name you had or what family you were from. Everything was about whether or not you were a member of ISIS.

**Were most of the ansar from a particular class background?**

Many of those who became high class were from the tribes or the working class. You see, ISIS changed the whole system. And this hasn’t ended. Now, after the defeat of ISIS, there is another class structure. The new upper class is composed of those who worked against ISIS. The second class are those whose family members were killed by ISIS—the victims of ISIS. The third class are those who remained in Mosul—the amma. And the fourth class are those who left the city. It is like they don’t deserve the victory and are not considered part of the liberation.

And now, the upper class is not only made up of people from Mosul, but also people who came from outside to fight against ISIS. They have the right to do whatever they want because they are in the new upper class.

Another social class has emerged after the liberation, made up of people who joined ISIS and their families. They have been excluded from the new society, just like what ISIS did to the Christians, Yazidis and Sunnis who worked against them. In the new situation, people who joined ISIS and their families—even if the family members did not join or support ISIS—are excluded from the new society.

**During the three years of ISIS rule in Mosul, did people from working class backgrounds and rural areas change their views about ISIS? Or did they continue supporting the project?**

For the tribes, it’s kind of changing. Some tribes supported ISIS because they saw an opportunity for agriculture and for support against old enemies. This is especially true in the northwest which was a disputed area. Many Sunni tribes were deported from these areas after 2003. They supported ISIS because ISIS brought them back to their villages.

After two years, some tribes withdrew their support when they realized that ISIS was not what they had expected. They shifted their support to the Iraqi government.

But there are hundreds of individuals, especially religious people, who still support ISIS and believe in the caliphate. Also, the children and relatives of ISIS members who were killed feel abandoned and want revenge still support ISIS.

Social relations are becoming complicated in Mosul because the real problems were not solved. The government came to Mosul and took the city back from ISIS, but they just defeated ISIS on the ground. They didn't address the problems that led to the emergence of ISIS. And they are ignoring the consequences of ISIS rule and the battle for liberation.

Mosul is now divided in two. The division happened during the battle, because ISIS withdrew from the eastern side several months before they were defeated in the west. Now there are people from the western side of Mosul and people from the east. Mosul is no longer a single city. And there are more social problems and conflicts. I don't know what will happen in the next few years, but the city will not be the same.
During the battle to liberate Mosul, you predicted that ISIS would not withdraw from the city but would instead stay and fight. In retrospect, you were right. The battle involved heavy destruction, including thousands of homes and all of the bridges over the Tigris. Was there another way to end ISIS rule without the further destruction of Mosul?

They had options, not just one option. When the Iraqi security forces and the international coalition decided to retake Mosul, they planned to retake the east side and then move to the west side from north and south. They wanted to open a corridor to the western part of Nineveh province to push ISIS toward Syria. They thought it would be easier to fight in the desert or along the Iraq–Syria border. But Assad was gaining control over more areas in Syria at that time and the Iranian–backed Popular Mobilization Units decided to block the corridor. There was no way to push ISIS out of the city.

Still, they had many other options. If you go back to Mosul Eye, I even described the situation with maps. But no one was listening. They decided to besiege the Old City of Mosul on the west bank. They bombed the Old City for months even though they knew that the houses could be destroyed with just one bullet. And you can see the consequences. We lost our city just so they could say they defeated ISIS. Yes, of course, thank you for defeating ISIS. But at what cost?

It has been nearly one year since the last ISIS strongholds fell in the Old City. What is the current status of efforts to rebuild Mosul and enable the return of the displaced?

There has not been much effort to rebuild the infrastructure, just basic services, especially in the eastern part of the city. This is part of the conflict between East and West. The East wasn’t as badly damaged and is getting back to life, while the West is still suffering.

The Old City is completely destroyed. Just two weeks ago they excavated more than 1,000 corpses that were beneath the rubble in the Old City, including children, women and elders. I believe we still have more than 5,000 bodies to find.

Even with these difficulties, western Mosul is getting back to life. People are eager to go back. There has been less in the Old City. A few people decided to go back to their old markets, but no more than ten or 20 shops have been rebuilt. No one buys anything because there are simply no people in the Old City.

To be honest, rebuilding is easy. People can rebuild their city and go back to their lives. They just need some money. If the government provided more money, the city would come back to life. But historic Mosul is gone. UNESCO received money from the United Arab Emirates to rebuild the al-Nuri Mosque and some other historical sites. But Mosul will not be the same. The city with a diverse society and a longstanding social structure is gone. Now, in my opinion, Mosul is only pictures and memories.

Do you think there are any prospects for rebuilding the diverse city of Mosul with Sunni and Shiite, Arab and Kurd, Yazidis and Christians?

No.

Cities have always played such an important role, not just in Iraq, but throughout the region. What role do you envision cities like Mosul playing in the future of Iraq?

There is no positive result of any war. But the only good thing that happened in Iraq after the destruction of Mosul is that now, for the first time in 15 years, we see the people of Iraq seeking their national identity.

You have people saying that Mosul was sacrificed to retrieve the national identity. During the Iraqi election in May, we had for the first time a national discourse between Mosul and Basra, Baghdad and Najaf. It is no longer about Shiite or Sunni. It is about whether or not we can rebuild a national identity in Iraq.

In Mosul, all Iraqi blood was mixed together. You had Sunni blood, Yazidi, Shiite, Christian, Arab, Kurd, Turkman. All of the Iraqi blood was mixed in the ground of Mosul. As a citizen of Mosul, I would accept the destruction of my city to see an Iraqi national identity rebuilt.

That’s a powerful vision. But as you said before, the real problems have not been addressed: There is still the question of what it will take to address those conditions.

We have something new happening in Mosul now. We have a growing youth movement. It will take a few years for this movement to organize itself, for the youth to recognize themselves as a force that can create change.

When it comes to history, to our previous society, that was destroyed. When it comes to the future, I’m talking about a new city. And to be completely honest, I am no longer a part of the city. This is not my city anymore. My city is gone.

But in the near future you will see more national discourse. People are recalling their history and their good memories to seek a new national identity. They are thinking about the past and what happened in Mosul and searching for a better future. Hopefully, this will lead to a new system in Iraq. This is the first time for young people from Mosul to visit Karbala or Najaf, the so-called Shiite cities, and for people from there to visit Mosul.

Right now, I am preparing an appeal to the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and other political leaders to announce the new government in Mosul. If they really want to change Iraq, they should go to the sacrificed city and announce their new government in Mosul. This could give hope for a future, for a new Iraq. Not the Iraq of 2003. A completely new Iraq with a new system. We will not be able to change the constitution or the corrupt politicians. But after what happened to Mosul, this election could provide an opportunity to build a national identity in Iraq. It seems to me that, for the first time, Iraqis have agreed on the necessity of having a national identity.
On a warm winter day in 2018, a young boy was attending to a group of tumbler pigeons on the rooftop of a two-story shanty house on the outskirts of Sur, the walled old city of Diyarbakır in the Kurdish region of Turkey. As the pigeons took off from the ground, the boy grabbed a broom and began to orchestrate how high and wide they would dance in the sky. Well-trained by their little owner, who may sell them in the black market, these domesticated birds momentarily attracted the attention of everyone seated in an open-air teahouse facing the neighborhoods of Sur that in 2016–2017 had been razed following the urban warfare between Kurdish armed groups and Turkish security forces. Despite a ten-meter-long Turkish flag hanging from Keçiburcu, the main tower of the city walls, the customers turned from the symbol of occupation to the harmonious turn-and-break of this nonchalant kit over the valley of Tigris River. At the intersection of the militarized neoliberal policies of the Turkish government and the everyday struggles of Kurdish residents, they brought about—for a fleeting moment—an elusive imagination from the recent past. What kinds of imaginations imbued the city of Sur prior to its destruction? How has the Turkish occupation sought to ensure that what has been taken away cannot be reclaimed?

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government came to power in 2002, it has deployed a Janus-faced political strategy to keep the conflict with the Kurdish freedom movement at bay. Behind closed doors, government officers negotiated intermittently with the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish freedom movement Abdullah Öcalan, who proposed a decentralized model of governance in which the

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Kurds would entertain autonomy. In the meantime, the AKP’s then-main ally, Gülen Jamaat, exercised repressive force in the Kurdish region through the positions it held in the police department and judiciary. When the secret negotiations evolved into peace talks in March 2013, the Kurds remained suspicious that the AKP government was using the peace process to obtain their support for the exceptional executive powers of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s presidency without any intention of granting the Kurds autonomy. What had been considered a conspiracy in March 2013 became reality in June 2015 when, upon the AKP’s loss of majority power at the parliamentary elections, Erdoğan declared the peace talks null. In preparation for early elections in November 2015, the AKP formed a coalition with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) to entice Turkish far-right voters who had stood against the traces of various civilizations, as an ideal space to foster the “fortress” took a material form in 2015 as Turkish security forces fought Kurdish armed groups to seize Sur, Diyarbakır’s walled old city.

Operation Sur cannot be reduced to the destruction of an old walled city. Beyond the deaths, destroyed buildings and compensation payments, what has been lost are the potentialities—the wish-images—that Kurds imbued in Sur and with which they defended it. Prior to the operation, Sur was charged with revolutionary and bourgeois imaginaries folded into the autonomy project of the Kurdish freedom movement. The Kurdish middle class imagined Sur, bearing the traces of various civilizations, as an ideal space to foster multiculturalism. To the armed youth, however, Sur symbolized a mytho-historical fortress from which they would oust Turkish security forces and proclaim autonomy. The operation not only destroyed Sur but also repressed these two political imaginations: Sur as the city of multiculturalism and Sur as the fortress of liberation.

**The City of Multiculturalism**

The Turkish Army launched Operation Sur in full force on December 2, 2015. On November 28, a few days before the operation, the first bullets of the coming war killed human-rights defender and president of the Diyarbakır Bar Association Tahir Elçi at a press conference at the Four-Legged Minaret. Elçi had chosen the Minaret, situated at the center of Sur, for its symbolic location: The site was surrounded by Roman walls and bastions, Byzantine churches, Islamic mosques and Ottoman bazaars and basalt stone houses. Like many other well-known public figures of Diyarbakır, Elçi envisioned Sur as a site to commemorate the genocidal violence that had decimated Diyarbakır’s Armenian and other non-Muslim populations at the turn of the twentieth century. Upon the ruins of this violent past, the state had inscribed its Turkish signature through monuments and murals of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Opposing these state policies, upper-middle class residents of Diyarbakır thought of Sur as a space where peaceful coexistence between non-Muslim and non-Turkish populations could be built, even if the survivors of genocide were no longer living in Diyarbakır.

In tandem with de-escalation of the armed conflict in the 2000s, Kurdish mayors and civil society representatives developed numerous urban projects to renovate the historical sites that had been left to decay by the central government. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2008, the former Sur mayor Abdullah Demirbaş called these municipal plans “The Streets of Culture Project.” As he stressed, “So many civilizations lived in the Sur district over millennia: Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Nestorians, Jews, Turks, Hanafi, Shafi’i, Alevi, Yezidi, traces of Sabians […] The more we lose this multicultural side of ourselves, the more we become one another’s enemies.” In 2012, at the Diyarbakır municipality’s request, the central government declared Sur a “risk area” based on the Law on the Regeneration of Areas under Disaster Risk, commonly known as the Urban Regeneration Law. That law prescribed procedures for the improvement, evacuation and renewal of areas under risk of earthquake, flood and landslide, among other potential threats. The law permitted the municipality to demolish decaying tall apartment buildings to protect Sur’s authentic historical buildings from ruination. Internationally, the municipality succeeded in having the walled city and its gardens declared a UNESCO cultural heritage site in 2015.

The goal of these conservation projects was not only to create a lucrative cultural tourist industry but also to contest the state’s decades-long Turkification policies in the Kurdish region. Through the clearing of shanty towns around the city walls, the reconstruction of Surp Giragos Armenian Church and the renovation of a Jewish Synagogue, the Diyarbakır municipality attempted to carve out a space for the recognition of the city’s autochthonous communities whose existence had long been denied. This nostalgic picture of multiculturalism nonetheless excluded a significant portion of its present residents, namely the urban poor. As part of neither a golden past nor a promising future, most of these residents had come to the city after the evacuation of their villages by the Turkish Army during the “dirty war” of the 1990s. Without any urban infrastructure to support the mass wave of forced migration, they built a life in those decaying buildings that the municipality was planning to destroy in the name of preserving Sur’s cultural heritage. Prior to
the military operation, Sur had an eclectic architecture in which a tall concrete apartment, a two-story basalt stone mansion and a spectacular church stood side by side. While the narrow streets of its inner neighborhoods prevented cars from entering, the ongoing gentrification erected an invisible border between the residents of decaying houses and the patrons of renovated Diyarbakır serving brunch during the day and holding concerts at night.

The Fortress of Liberation

The new war hit Diyarbakır after the breakdown of the peace process between the Kurdish freedom movement and the Turkish government. The Kurdish freedom movement, inspired by the success of Syrian Kurds in Rojava, shifted the locus of the armed conflict from the mountains to urban centers. The urban youth replaced well-trained guerrillas as the carriers of the struggle for Kurdish autonomy. Starting in August 2015, people’s assemblies denounced state institutions as illegitimate and declared that they would establish their own rule in the Kurdish region. In the meantime, young men and women organized themselves into self-defense units to erect barricades and dig trenches in the city centers most strategic for street battles with the police. In Diyarbakır, Sur was ideal for this purpose, given its labyrinthine streets, underground tunnels, basalt-stone city walls and connections between shanties on the other side of the Four-Legged Minaret.

The November 28 press conference of the Diyarbakır Bar Association was the last civilian initiative to stop irregular armed clashes from turning into a full-blown war. At midday, Elçi and 20 other lawyers stood in front of cameras with placards reading, “I am the heritage of humanity. Protect your heritage.” By anthropomorphizing the minaret, participants in the press conference extended an invitation to the armed youth to claim the renovated historical buildings of Sur as theirs. Their call, however, did not resonate with the way many armed youth imagined heritage. As Elçi gave his speech condemning the use of violence, two young men carrying light weapons ran into the street, chased by undercover police. As they passed the lawyers, the police sprayed the street with bullets. When the firing stopped, the young men had escaped but Elçi was found dead under the shadow of the minaret. The future of Sur was now in the hands of the armed youth born into a war and determined to defend the streets that they knew like the palm of their hand. What for the middle class was a symbol of cultural heritage was for the youth at this moment a fortress of liberation.

The youth’s sense of heritage drew on a radically different lineage that refused to attribute any intrinsic value to buildings. A diary written by a Kurdish fighter in Sur, widely circulated on social media, opens: “Let Sur be the Fortress Dimdim.” The epic story of Fortress Dimdim draws from the seventeenth-century Kurdish insurgency against the oppressive rule of Safavid Persians. Built atop Gozan Hill by a Kurdish bey, the fortress contained secret passages, high walls and an underground water system that protected the Kurds from external assaults. As the Safavid emperor advanced toward the fortress and cut off its water canals, the story goes, the Kurdish insurgents detonated explosives inside the fortress and died heroically.

In the eyes of the fighters, Sur was the modern Fortress Dimdim and they were prepared to die inside its walls. The diary explains that from August to November 2015, the armed youth erected barricades at the entrance to the main streets, laid mines in inner neighborhoods and stretched large tarpaulins across rooftops as camouflage from helicopter gunships. On December 2, the Diyarbakır governor declared round-the-clock curfews in six of 18 Sur neighborhoods, even refusing to allow local, national or international human rights organizations to conduct on-site investigations. Hospitals, schools and food markets were closed, and electricity and running water would soon be cut off as well. Sur residents were given two days to evacuate their homes. The Kurds already been displaced from their home villages were thus subjected to yet another eviction in the city where they had taken refuge in the 1990s. According to Amnesty International, 24,000 people moved out of Sur in a matter of 48 hours.

When the Turkish Army besieged Sur, some civilians remained inside with the armed youth and guerrilla fighters. While accurate estimates are non-existent, the Kurdish freedom movement estimates that some 60 armed people remained, whereas the Turkish government puts that number at 500. Throughout the 100–day siege, human rights organizations demanded that the government establish a humanitarian corridor for civilians, to no avail. Tanks and helicopter gunships bombarded the inner neighborhoods; armored bulldozers demolished the destroyed buildings and widened the roads; and troops occupied the cleared paths to fight at close range. Riot police harshly repressed civilian protests against the bombing. A militarized city, Diyarbakır fell into silence with dark smoke rising from its center. By the end of the operation on March 10, 2016, the army had destroyed thousands of buildings and killed 157 people.

Sur under Occupation

The middle class and the armed youth associated Sur with completely different wish-images. The former subscribed to the same discourse of autonomy proposed by Abdullah Öcalan, but their image of autonomous struggle entailed different strategies from the latter’s position of self-defense. Sur had to be transformed through either the renovation of individual historical buildings or its liberation from the repressive state apparatus. In an effort to stifle both of these political imaginations, the government continued to destroy the city in 2016–2017 after the Turkish army withdrew from Sur.

In the place of the democratically elected Kurdish mayors who were sentenced to prison for aiding “terrorists,” the
government appointed trustees to govern and enact a massive expropriation and reconstruction project. With reference to the Urban Regeneration Law, 82 percent of the buildings and land in Sur were swiftly expropriated on March 21, 2016.\textsuperscript{11} That law, which once had allowed the Diyarbakır municipality to strengthen the non–Turkish and non–Islamic character of the city, was used by the government to reconstruct Sur in accordance with what then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu referred to as Seljuk and Ottoman architecture.\textsuperscript{12} The Ministry of the Environment and Urbanization claimed that the reconstruction of expropriated areas would comply with the master plan developed by the municipality in 2012. When the Ministry revised that master plan in 2017, however, the focus shifted from the preservation of cultural heritage to state security.

The revised plan prescribes the construction of “security service zones” in all six neighborhoods of Sur where the armed youth had been located. These zones, with high-security police stations, would be connected through widened streets that would ensure smooth transportation of armored vehicles, ambulances and water cannons. The Ministry of the Environment and Urbanism recommended that the architecture of police stations mimic Diyarbakır houses to integrate the security infrastructure into Sur’s “authentic” street life.\textsuperscript{13} The Diyarbakır Chamber of Architects objected to the plan on the grounds that neither the buildings under construction nor the security zones fit Sur’s urban life. On the contrary, they argued, the security zones and their exterior walls were planned to be higher than the city walls to create another fortress within a fortress.\textsuperscript{14} The Ministry dismissed the Chamber’s objection.

By winter 2018, the high concrete walls of the construction sites prevented Diyarbakırites from seeing what the new Sur would look like. Among the completed sites, the Mosque of Prophet Solomon was the most spectacular, with its enormous courtyard intended for Quranic reading sessions. On the other side of Sur, the tower of Keçiburcu was turned into a makeshift police station next to a nightclub intended to serve the security forces. In the city center, the only building constructed on a flat area cleared of rubble was in a “security service zone” surrounded by eight-meter-high walls, wire fences, numerous surveillance cameras and high-voltage neon lights.

**Justice and Return**

The Turkish Army destroyed the city itself, but it also destroyed the potentialities of a place—one that had given birth to different class-based visions of autonomy. As a settler-colonial imaginary reconstructs Sur, everything familiar turns into strange. While walking along the commercial street of Sur past its renovated shops, a former resident who accompanied me commented with frustration: “They could have at least used Diyarbakır’s basalt for renovation instead of white paint and wooden frames. Are we in Diyarbakır or in Bodrum [a touristic
Mediterranean coastal town)?” Sur may not become another Bodrum, but it no longer feels like Diyarbakır.

During my last visit to Diyarbakır, I was struck by an idiom written on the city walls across from a security service zone: Gün olur devran döner. The words translate as “Every cloud has a silver lining,” but the literal translation is more to the point: “One day the time returns.” In the aftermath of Operation Sur, the government has tried to ensure that the time of those who had the courage to inscribe this graffiti on the city walls will not return. New security zones, widened streets and inflated housing prices may sever any intimate ties between the street and the home, the urban poor and the city, politics and spatial imagination. Government-appointed trustees even deny those who died in Sur a proper burial site. Yet the call of the dead for divine justice may escape the spatial politics of state officers.15

After Operation Sur, the Diyarbakır governor has maintained the curfew in neighborhoods still under reconstruction. Only officially appointed security forces and construction workers can enter such places. To determine the compensation to be paid to local residents, however, government officers take residents to the curfew sites where their houses used to be located. Some residents have refused to accept what little money the government has offered as compensation for their lost homes. Others have not even been able to locate where their homes once stood due to the extent of destruction. According to one story, a former resident of Sur decided to claim compensation and accompanied a government officer to her relatively little-destroyed neighborhood. When she opened the door to her own home, a young girl stood still and alone in her living room. The girl’s hollow-cheeked face was emptied of life, her body as thin as a rail. When the woman saw the girl, she shut the door and told the government officer that she had changed her mind; she no longer wanted the government’s money.

The rumor about this young girl in the midst of a curfew zone made its listeners wonder whether anyone could possibly survive that long without food or water. Was the house haunted by the ghost of a girl killed in Sur? In saving the girl from the government officer, was the woman abandoning her to death? Perhaps the uncanny figure of a young girl stands for a loss for which the government could never compensate. What is at stake in the Kurds’ struggle for justice is life and death. The time of those who are neither dead nor alive may return despite, or because of, the government’s denial of any space for them in Sur.

Endnotes


5 For a brief analysis of the breakdown of the latest peace process, see Serra Hakyemz, “Turkey’s Failed Peace Process with the Kurds: A Different Explanation,” Middle East Brief 111, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University (June 2017): https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb111.html.
7 For the diary notes of this fighter that were published after his death, see Doğan Çetin, “Tir University’s Gündem-2220761.”
13 See “Observations of the Government of the Republic of Turkey on the Admissibility and Merits Concerning the Applications Nos. 3377/16 and 9449/16 Halil Yavuz and Others v. Turkey and 2 Other Applications,” submitted on July 11, 2017 from the Turkish government to the European Court of Human Rights.
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