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The Arab Center for Architecture (ACA): Interview with George Arbid

by Deen Sharp Sep 29 2015

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The Arab Center for Architecture (ACA) was established in 2008 to raise awareness about contemporary architecture and urbanism within civil society. In an interview I held on 25 June 2015 at the offices of the ACA in Beirut, George Arbid, the co-founder and current director of the ACA, discussed the work of the ACA and modern architecture in the region. Arbid explained the activities and aims of the ACA, including the establishment of an archive, a library, educational programs and the formation of the DoCoMoMo Lebanon chapter. He outlined the important contributions of Arab architects to modernist architecture and the complexities of talking about "Arab architecture," or an "Arab modern movement." He also discussed the exhibition *Fundamentalists and Other Arab Modernisms*, and its accompanying publication *Architecture from the Arab world (1914-2014) a Selection*, which formed the Kingdom of Bahrain's pavilion at the fourteenth International Architecture Exhibition La Biennale de Venezia, in 2014.

Deen Sharp (DS): Before we discuss the work and activities of the Arab Center for Architecture (ACA), could you provide us with a broad introduction to the idea of modernist architectural heritage and its importance?

George Arbid (GA): Architecture in general terms is a cultural product, and is in constant motion. When [the public] speak of local architecture, they often mean traditional architecture. For instance, if you ask people what Lebanese architecture is about, they would talk about the nineteenth century or early twentieth century triple-arched houses with red-tiled roofs, stones and central layout. However, Lebanese architecture or, I prefer to say architecture produced in Lebanon, has gone through [several] transformations. I could claim that an architecture produced nowadays can also reflect local identity, and can be coined as Lebanese. The determining factors of that identity are climate, geography, topography, economy, need, building techniques, personal and societal beliefs, cultural aspirations, local ethos, and so

on.

At ACA, we are interested in promoting the idea of architecture as culture, and therefore modern architecture of the twentieth century as part of [our] heritage. Like any architecture produced in the twentieth century, it was subjected to faster influences than in the earlier periods but anyone who knows the history of architecture well, knows that in earlier times architecture was something that was also contaminated. And, I would argue [contaminated] often positively by travels, wars, cultural influences and so on. Therefore, the identity of architecture has always been subjected to various influences. It is our task to try to define the specificities of architecture in the Arab world in the twentieth century, and promote the idea that it is a cultural product.

DS: Picking up on that thread, the history of modern architecture usually focuses on Western architects and their products, such as Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as one of the most significant modernist architects outside of the Western canon, Oscar Niemeyer. But obviously not many Arab architects pop up in this central canon of what we understand as the modern movement. Could you identity some particular Arab architects that could be inserted into this canon, and identify their specific contributions?

GA: Certainly, the first name that comes to mind for me, is Sayed Karim, an Egyptian architect (also known as Sayed Korayem). [Karim] is not well known because the world was more interested in the work and writings of Hassan Fathy. [Fathy] is certainly a major architect of the twentieth century who represents a change, an idiosyncratic change, in the production of architecture in Egypt. His is a polemical work that some [have] criticized for not being realistic. Of course, when we speak of Fathy we think of building in clay, people building for themselves, the houses [for] the poor, and so on. But, more or less at the same time (1940s-1970s), there was another production in Egypt by architects such as Sayed Karim, who also published the magazine called *al-Imara*. [Karim] promoted a totally different [kind of] architecture, which was more progressive in a certain way, and more experimental in another, and certainly more adapted to rapid urbanization. [Karim] deserves serious research, and indeed Mohamed el-Shahed has recently completed a doctoral thesis that partly analyzes how Karim negotiated architectural modernism in the context of Egypt.

I could also name other Arab architects. In Lebanon, pioneers like Farid Trad, the engineer-architect Antoine Tabet, and Said Hejal who designed many of the Maqassed schools. Some of [these schools] are testimonies to very rational uses of space in an urban context. You have Joseph Philippe Karam with his daring projects, like the famous City Centre (also known as the Egg) in Beirut. [For an overview of Lebanese modern architects see here] In Sudan, you have Abdel Moneim Mustafa who, in the 1970s and 1980s, produced an architecture that would nowadays certainly win an award in sustainable design. The reason it could win an award is simply that they had little means, and little means in architecture usually leads to resourcefulness. These architects working along such lines in Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, and other countries in the Arab world, were producing an architecture that was climate responsive, economic, and belonged to the local ways of doing things. And yet, they were progressive, and forward-looking. This is the most interesting aspect of this type of architecture. It is not an architecture that dwells on identity for the sake of the looks of it, but rather for the lessons learned from previous traditions and ways of doing things.

DS: Taking together the various individuals that you have mentioned, would you argue that they produced a distinctive regional modern movement in architecture? Is there really something that we can call the Arab modern movement?

GA: Perhaps speaking of a movement would require more setups and tools, like for example magazines. In the case of Sayed Karim, we could say so as there was some sort of promotion of modernism as a movement around him. In many other cases, it was individual undertakings, although most of those architects were part of a larger mode of thinking, connected to artists, for example in Beirut or Baghdad. Baghdad would be the best example. People like Rifat Chadirji, Jawad Salim, Qahtan Awni, and Qahtan Madfai were part of some sort of renaissance of architecture in Baghdad and in Iraq. Perhaps they did not create a movement per se, that was recognizable and announced, like the Bauhaus movement or other more organized groups. Yet, we could say that there is a modern Iraqi architect or modern Iraqi architecture, as there is a version of modernism in other countries.

Perhaps, [however,] we should refuse the appellation of modern Arab architecture. It does not make much sense to me. [This is because] the climate is very different from Baghdad to Beirut to North Africa. The cultural traditions are similar in ways, of course influenced by religious and societal beliefs, and praxis. At the same time, those variations are enormous. In the Lebanese case, the architecture of the mountain is significantly different from the architecture of the coast. Even the materials used are not the same. You would use sandstone in the city, and plaster it because it is porous, and you cannot keep it un-plastered. Sandstone is found on the coast from Batroun to Jbeil [Byblos], Tripoli, Saida and Beirut whereas the houses of the mountain, which are a variation of that model, are built with limestone.

The detailing, the structural capacities of the wall and the construction are all different. Therefore, it does not make sense for me to say Lebanese architecture *per se*, or Arab architecture *per se*. One has to be more specific. Yes, we could speak then of regional, when we refer to locality in a narrower sense, rather than [referring to] the global region as the Middle East or the Arab world. It is like when people say “Islamic architecture”—Islamic when, where?

DS: In establishing the Arab Center for Architecture, which you co-founded in 2008, how have you dealt with this definitional tension, and how are you framing your approach to the Arab Center for Architecture?

GA: The appellation certainly explains that we are interested in the broader region, [beyond] Lebanon where we are located. It is called the *Arab* Center for Architecture; it could also be called the Center for Architecture in the Arab World, but certainly not the Center for Arab Architecture. And, that explains more or less how we place ourselves. It is a center that is located in the Arab world, it is interested in researching, disseminating, documenting, archiving, and debating architecture in the Arab world. Not only the architecture of the twentieth century, because we aim to be a platform for debating the current city and its developments. We are not particularly interested in researching more ancient architecture—earlier than the eighteenth, or even mid-nineteenth century. There are other venues, people, and academicians interested in that aspect. We are interested in regionalism per se. We would like to tackle something that falls more or less in the gap between academia on the one hand, and professional bodies and orders on the other: dealing with civil society, disseminating architecture as culture to a larger number of people, and trying to make a difference on the terms, for example, of advocacy for preservation. [We do not mean] preservation of a particular period, but the principle of preserving what deserves to be preserved—[an] architecture understood as text on the evolution of the city.

We are aware of the difficulties of convincing authorities and individuals who deal with the issue that a building made of glass, steel, aluminum, and concrete is heritage. You can hardly convince people that a building of the nineteenth century is worth being preserved. So when you come and say, you should preserve a building built for example in the 1950s, such as the Hotel Carlton [in Raouche, Beirut] that was demolished a few years ago, you usually have a hard time convincing people. We tend to consider buildings as economic artifacts and products—which they certainly are in a certain way. But, they are also cultural products. [Therefore, it is important to involve] the public in decision making over what should be kept, and this is a battle we are in the midst of.

DS: You have given us a sense of the type of people you are trying to engage in the work of the ACA. Could you give us a sense in more concrete, if you could excuse the pun, examples of the sort of activities that the center has been engaged with over the past seven years that it has been active?

GA: The first activity is the physical collection of archives that is open to the public. We have a room at the center dedicated to collecting physical archives. This archive contains the drawings of architects, either technical or perspective drawings, photographs of buildings or documents related to the architects. In some cases we have correspondence between architects and clients. We even have bills from the construction that speak of the materials of the time and the source of material. As our staff is limited for the time being and we are a growing institution, access is given by appointment.

The second activity is our library. It is still embryonic, but, this year, we aim to develop this collection. The collection is open to the public, and we do have students and post-docs, architects, and even just interested people, coming and reading here, though they cannot borrow books. We have a very small collection, specialized in nineteenth and twentieth century architecture in Lebanon and the Arab world, in addition to books on the history and theory of architecture.

["Revealing Architecture" Leaflet, p.2: One of ACA's Dissemination Projects. Photo ACA]

[Exhibition at ACA. Photo ACA]

We also have a program of dissemination of architecture with the broader public, which we call Revealing Architecture (or *Kashf al-Imara* in Arabic), and it has four components, financed by the European Union. One component is organizing six lectures annually where we invite Lebanese architects who practiced in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to come and present their work, in conversation with an architect (usually under the age of fifty) who looks at the work, and reacts to it from today's perspective. We have had three of those lectures, and we still have three more running for the year. We have an audience of sixty to seventy people who come, and engage in very interesting debates. We film these talks, and they will be posted on our website. We also have a very active Facebook page and a website. Another component of the project is organizing twelve visits to either iconic buildings, or important neighborhoods in Lebanon, explaining the history of the development of the neighborhood. We have had already six of those, and we have six more to go, and the audience is varied. For example, we invite tourist guides to come, and get acquainted with how you can speak about the modern city. Of course, they are trained to speak about important archeological sites, traditional places, villages, and the city center for its economic growth and interest. But, they are not usually equipped to speak about neighborhoods, or for that matter, modern iconic buildings. There is architectural tourism happening here. So we want to be part of that by distributing scientific knowledge to people who can in turn disseminate it.

The third component which I think is very important, and part of a long-term agenda, is to work with school children. We have prepared a tool kit that we will [launch] in October 2015 [for] kids aged around thirteen. We are doing this with

the Lebanese Ministry of Education. The tool kit will present architecture, the city, and public space to school kids. It is of course made in a playful way, and it is very interactive. We expect this to be disseminated in public schools in Lebanon, and hopefully in other countries [in the Arab region].

The fourth component is an architectural map of Beirut with the important neighborhoods and landmarks. It is a sort of promenade in the city with some information about the importance of each building, its historical context and the architect. This is the plan for the current year.

[Workshop at ACA with Ashkal Alwan students, with George Arbid. Photo by ACA]

DS: You have also founded DoCoMoMo Lebanon. For people who are unfamiliar with DoCoMoMo, could you introduce the broad outlines of the organization? Also, what does it mean for you to have founded a chapter here in Lebanon, and how does the ACA seek to pursue that path as well?

GA: DoCoMoMo is particularly important in my point of view because it is a world institution. It has around forty-five to fifty chapters around the world. DoCoMoMo is the acronym for the International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites, and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement. The people who are behind this are academicians and professionals. It started in Holland, and has spread all over the world. The interesting side of this institution is that it is composed of professionals, practicing architects who deal with, among other things, renovation, conservation, and preservation of modern buildings, but we also have academicians, such as historians and sociologists, who are interested in their history. And they organize international and regional conferences. We are planning a conference in Beirut next year that will deal with the preservation of buildings, and the adaptive reuse of buildings. Each panel will have a speaker from Lebanon, a speaker from the region and an international one. Today, we cannot only speak of sustainability [in relation to] high-tech facades. Preserving buildings is also sustainable, as it has to do with recycling the building stock we have. I am particularly interested in this from the design side. For example, I teach at the American University of Beirut (AUB), and I often give studios there to students on the adaptive reuse of buildings or neighborhoods. The work that has been done in these studios provides a lesson on how to try to save certain buildings, not by necessarily countering the current building code or ignoring it, but by using the opportunities it can offer. We therefore try to strike a balance at the neighborhood scale, beyond the concern for the building as a unit. This is different from either the tabula rasa [approach], or absolute preservation. Because we are interested in reality as a starting point for operative change, we keep, at the core of the studio, the understanding of the regulatory setups, procedures, mechanisms at play in the production of buildings and cities, and we engage in the intellectual and formal exercise through a project.

DS: One of the ACA's most prominent and significant projects thus far, I think it is fair to say, has been the participation in the Venice Biennale as part of the Kingdom of Bahrain's pavilion. *Fundamentalists and Other Arab Modernisms* was an exhibition that you co-produced with the Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury. Before talking about the important publication *Architecture from the Arab world (1914-2014), a Selection* that formed the centerpiece for the pavilion, can you tell us first about how two Lebanese architects happened to produce Bahrain's pavilion?

GA: It is true that it is a major achievement. Bernard Khoury, who is part of our board, proposed the project to us. He was contacted by Noura al-Sayeh who is an architect counselor for the Ministry of Culture in Bahrain. [Khoury] was called in to design the pavilion, and he proposed ACA, and me in particular, as a co-curator. The theme set by Rem

Koolhaas, the director of the 2014 Venice Biennale, was "one hundred years of architecture." Koolhaas had proposed to look back at the century, and to try to understand the changes in the world that produced the cities and the architecture in which we live. Given my expertise on the topic, the fact that we had already gathered some archives, and our connections, Khoury thought we would be good interlocutors. I was very happy to actually co-curate the pavilion with him, because we quickly convinced Bahrain that we should be doing a pavilion on architecture in the Arab world rather than just in Bahrain. The visionary Bahraini minister of culture, Sheikha Mai, quickly agreed on the idea. So, the pavilion is actually a gift in some way from Bahrain to the Arab world to exhibit one hundred years of architecture.

[The Bahrain Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Architecture Biennale, co-curated by George Arbid and Bernard Khoury. A rotunda of bookshelves displaying the book produced for the occasion. In the middle: a table offers a timeline and map of the Arab world with one hundred poles representing the buildings showcased in the book. Above: a circular ceiling with simultaneous projections of a man reciting the twenty-two national anthems of Arab countries. Photo by Delfino Sisto Legnani]

Khoury brilliantly designed the pavilion, in conversation with al-Sayeh and me. We decided that we would not exhibit actual photographs of buildings, or models of buildings. [Instead,] we would speak about the current situation of the Arab world, its geography, and the unfortunate political dislocation. Architecture would be displayed in a physical book that people could take with them. We wanted to step away from the common digital projections and atmosphere [that this format creates]. So, the pavilion is a space that you enter, it is a very clear space, it is like a wall of books, a rotunda of books. We distributed forty thousand copies for free. It is a lavish book, which won two awards, the Most Beautiful Swiss Book 2014, and the Best Book Design From All Over the World 2015 at the Leipzig fair. People could not believe they could simply take copies. Students took two, three copies for their friends. That was the best thing we had done because it got disseminated physically. Of course, it is very easy nowadays to disseminate images: you go on the Internet and [easily obtain them]. But, [it is much more difficult to] go find a drawing in Mauritania, or in Egypt, or in the archives of an architect who stopped his work thirty or forty years ago. It was a huge undertaking, and we were very happy with the result.

The book is one hundred and eighty pages, and it presents a hundred buildings with in photographs and drawings. [For a building to be included in the book, the stipulation] was for it to have a good drawing that represented the architectural idea, and the agency behind it, testifying for the visionary side of architecture. By giving priority to drawings, we wanted to disseminate the importance of architecture archives. [Each] building included also had to have a public concern. We did not put individual houses, as we considered that, in such a venue, we should be speaking about the “publicness” of architecture. We also have essays [in the book]. I invited colleagues and researchers to write essays about the Arab world. I wrote about Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan (the Levant). The pavilion itself was very well received. It has a map of the Arab world with a timeline; it was a beautiful idea put into form and space.

DS: The book had a wonderful description that I want to highlight. It said it was a “subjective, non-exhaustive and sometime fictional reading of the architectural legacy of the last hundred years across the Arab world.” I also want to setout the thesis that the pavilion sketched out for you to elaborate on. It stated that the pavilion outlines that “transition from the 1980s in which it is noted that the seeds of the modernist project were aborted, and a colonial map was replaced with the real estate developer’s model and neoliberal economics.”

GA: Yes, that is absolutely true. The map in the space of the pavilion itself had a timeline where you can see the

architecture we mostly witness now in the news, and how it has shifted to Dubai, Qatar and other places in the same area. The type of firms behind architecture is not the same anymore, and this has a huge impact on the architecture produced. It has an impact on public space, and what public space means, why it is there, and for whom. It also has to do with the image making of architecture: what is a landmark? There was a time when landmarks were buildings that [were related to] administration, with a collective, though not always progressive, agenda of independent nation building, and well-being for all. Whereas in this neoliberal time, interest and agency behind projects and reasons behind their implementation has shifted, and so has the role of the architect. The expectations and aspirations have shifted. This is legible in the book, and also around us in our cities. Obviously a center like ours cannot claim it can counter anything of the sort, yet what it can do is make alternatives visible, make things that were accomplished visible. Even stylistically, I would say, which is the most uninteresting part of architecture, but even at that level, one could argue that a comparison is useful to start thinking about change. The operations, the setups, the professional bodies and the stylistic and formal manifestations, are all things we like to look at, debate, and hope to trigger an influence on.

DS: Maybe one aspect that I see missing from the center's work, and missing from the regional landscape is a direct engagement with architectural criticism. None of the major newspapers in Arabic, English, or even French, and correct me if I am wrong, have an architectural critic of any sort. There is some architectural criticism that is going on in the form of blogs, and Facebook groups among architects or academics, but do you think the ACA can play a part in encouraging more public forms of architectural criticism?

GA: I absolutely agree with you, and your critique. Yes, criticism is absolutely necessary. It requires objectivity that comes from a certain distance and, of course, from knowledge. We certainly would support architectural criticism, and we want to do that. We have in mind an architectural magazine that would also be online, where these questions would be asked, and also where maybe answers can be sketched, which is also related to criticism. We would also like to implement an architectural award that would not necessarily be given to students or to people at the end of their careers—which the Order of Engineers and Architects in Lebanon does for instance. This would be an architectural award for practicing architects, [who are] at mid-career, that would pinpoint critically, and positively the work that we think should be highlighted, and be part of what is considered good architecture. When it comes to writing a critique, yes, it should definitely happen, and it should also happen in the Arabic language. We did not speak about the Arabic language in this interview, but I think it is crucial that things are disseminated in Arabic as well. We would like to also be involved in translations from English to Arabic, French to Arabic, or Arabic to other languages. The writings of Rifat Chadirji, for example, should be translated because he wrote often in English, but also in Arabic. His major book *Al-Ukhaidir* and *The Crystal Palace* do not have an English translation, which is a shame, as this is a very good testimony of the arts and architecture of Iraq from the 1930s to the 1970s, and 1980s. Translating major books from English, French, and other languages to Arabic would certainly have an impact, and we hope that we, and others, can do this. Of course, this would require more funding, and a setup involving translators, and professional people, because translating technical books and architectural theory is not an easy task, especially given concepts that are new for the Arabic language.

But to go back to criticism, certainly criticism is important. We have to make it more acceptable to colleagues. It is a tradition, and a mindset that has to filter through everyone, so that any critique is not taken personally, as there is perhaps this wrong concept that you cannot criticize your colleagues' work. When the whole enterprise is one that is distant from the object itself, and the author is speaking of better architecture, criticism is very important and should happen.

DS: **And, of course, in documenting and arguing for the protection of certain elements of the built environment over others, the ACA is always engaged in an act of criticism. Moreover, in creating a center around Arab modern architecture, an important critical intervention has been launched in attempting to expand public concern over the preservation of the built environment to include twentieth and twenty-first century architecture and architects. Spaces such as the ACA are a crucial and all too rare meeting point for practicing architects, academics, urban planners, developers and the broader public to engage with each other over the meaning of quality architecture, and urban space. Indeed, the ACA has already been the site of some crucial debates over Beirut's urban form, such as the construction of the Fouad Boutros Highway in Achrafieh. Architects and their architecture are important to how a city is formed, and a better understanding of what quality architecture is, and how it is achieved can result in an improved quality of (urban) life.**

[George Arbid is an architect and associate professor of architecture at the American University of Beirut (AUB). His doctoral dissertation at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design is titled "Practicing Modernism in Beirut:

Architecture in Lebanon, 1946-1970" (2002). Among his writings is "Beirut: the Phoenix and the Reconstruction Predicament," an essay that he wrote for Urbanization and the Changing Character of the Arab City published by ESCWA in 2005. He is the editor of Architecture from the Arab world (1914-2014), a Selection,*and the author of the forthcoming book* Karol Schayer Architect: A Pole in Beirut. *He also runs an architecture practice that, among other projects, designed the Shabb and Salem residences, the latter of which was nominated for the Aga Khan Award in 1998.]*

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Constellations: Searching for the Global Suburb

by Deen Sharp

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Conference Review: A Suburban Revolution? An International Conference on Bringing the Fringe to the Centre of Global Urban Research and Practice

[Figure 1: Suburban Tripoli? The Urban Fringes of Tripoli, Lebanon. Image by Author.]

Suburbanization is the crucial aspect of twenty first century urban development, as now most global urban growth is in the form of peripheral or suburban development. This is the central claim made by the organizers of *A Suburban Revolution? An International Conference on Bringing the Fringe to the Centre of Global Urban Research and Practice*.[1] The *Suburban Revolution?* conference is part of a Canadian-funded Major Collaborative Research Initiative (MCRI) entitled "Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land, and Infrastructure in the Twenty First Century (2010-2017)," which includes fifty scholars and many more students working worldwide. The project seeks to contribute to foundational thinking on suburbanization. Roger Keil, the principal organizer of the conference, argues we must realize that the "urban century" is rather the "suburban century."

But what is a suburb? Contemporary debates have highlighted that, just like cities, suburbs are many things. Attempts to define the suburb and the suburban are dominated by concerns over the binaries of center and the periphery, the whole and the part. Wide-ranging material realities and socio-geographical perceptions of the suburb make it very difficult to know what we are referencing when we refer to the suburb. Ann Forsyth (2012) cites complaints as far back as 1958 over the diverging definitions of the modern suburb and that a minimum definition continues to remain elusive.

In America and Britain, for example, the dominant perception of the mass-produced suburb is low-density, white, right wing, middle class and unimaginably boring, while in France, the *banlieue* is represented in the popular imagination as high-density, brown, working class and, as Mustafa Dikeç (2006) notes, since the 1990s, Islamic. In our contemporary era of global urbanism, the term suburb is applied to even broader and more complex contexts. In much of the global south, the suburb predominately references not the gated communities of the rich, but areas dominated by the urban

poor and deemed to be derivate of the center. The suburb remains a term that leads everywhere and nowhere at once. One of the problems, of course, is the city and its fringes are constantly moving targets. As Baudelaire wrote, “The form of a city changes quicker, alas, than the human heart.”

Increasingly, urban theorists, such as Andy Merrifield and Neil Brenner, have called to do away with conceptualizations between urban and rural, urban and regional, city and suburb, and to reframe the urban question. For Merrifield, we have entered a period of neo-Haussmannization, a global-urban strategy. A strategy in which the economic “peripheralization” of millions of people everywhere has meant that it no longer makes sense to refer to these people as being peripheral, there no longer exists a straightforward urban-suburban divide. While for Brenner, what he deems to be our current state of “planetary urbanization” means that political-economic spaces can no longer be treated as if they were composed of discrete, distinct, and universal “types” of settlement.

The organizers of the conference occupy an interesting interstitial conceptual space in their approach to the suburb. On the one hand, they have embraced the critiques of those that have called for abandoning the suburb as a concept and the need to reframe the urban question. While on the other hand, they have chosen to maintain the concept of the suburb, all be it hollowed out of any pre-existing meaning.

Roger Keil notes that instead of focusing on a specific definition of the suburb the conference adopts an inquisitive approach and is “…more keen on contextualizing the continuous suburbanization of our world in a general project of urban theory building.” Subsequently, the conference, and the accompanying edited volume *Suburban Constellations*, advance a definition of “suburbanization as the combination of an increase in non-central population and economic activity, as well as urban spatial expansion. Suburbanism(s) refers to a suburban way of life.”

The very loose framing of the suburb results in the conference failing to fully answer why the utilization of the “suburb” is analytically useful. Further than this, it resulted in uncertainty regarding what urban form participants were referring to outside the basic idea of non-rural spaces beyond the metropolitan core. The reductive definition of the suburb was especially problematic in the context of the examples from the global south.

For instance, Shubra Gururani presented on Gurgaon, a city thirty kilometres south of the Indian capital Delhi. A rural village in the 1970s, Gurgaon has since been transformed into a prime destination for many multi-national companies. Its growth has been so incredible that Saskia Sassen considers it to be one of the sixteen global cities to watch, according to Gururani. The example of Gurgaon was placed in stark contrast to the examples of global suburbanism(s) as squatter settlements in Sub-Saharan Africa and Turkey, or high-rise projects on the outskirts of Hanoi or middle class developments in the urban peripheries of Shanghai. Why Gurgaon is examined rather than high-rise projects on the outskirts of this city is unclear, and the critical analytical question of how and why Gurgaon is a periphery rather than a center is not addressed. The examples of the “suburb” from the global south displayed an unwieldy focus that was not evident in the case studies in the global north. But, this is not entirely problematic as one of the central contributions that the Global Suburbanism(s) project seeks to make is to include the urbanization of the global south in the debate on global suburbanisation(s). Importantly, Keil emphasizes that “…the inclusion of urbanization in the Global South in the debate on global suburbanism(s) is not a mere addition of more empirical cases to an existing script of peripheral expansion. It is the acknowledgment that the script of urban theorizing has to be rewritten from scratch.”

[Figure 2: Gurgaon, India. Image by Pithwilds via Wikimedia Commons]

Two central issues emerge, however, in the conference’s approach to integrating the global south into the debate on global suburbanism(s). Firstly, the script of urban theorizing cannot be rewritten when the concept, namely the suburb,

is not clear. Secondly and more importantly, it is unclear why the script of urban theorizing needs to be rewritten from scratch. For example, two previous conferences on the global suburb[2] were not referenced and, even if they could not be built upon, certainly their failings could have been outlined. The frequent calls for reloading urban theory and new vocabularies is also curious given the fact that starting from a discrete urban locale and urban type (the suburb), and defining suburbanism(s) as a "suburban way of life" are both very much rooted in the tradition of the Chicago School urban theorists of the 1930s.

In the rush to get out into the suburb, to rewrite urban theorizing from scratch and construct a global suburb project, preceding foundational work that has grappled with the challenges of researching cities, and specifically their peripheries, may have been under utilized. For instance, the significant literature and theorizing that exists on the spaces of rapid urban change in the global south was not substantially engaged, specifically the work of Abdou Maliq Simone, Garth Myers or Achille Mbembe (see a great review of De-Westernising Urban Theory by Armelle Choplin). One of the reasons for this lack of engagement may be that urban peripheries in this literature have not been engaged through the concept of the suburb but mainly as peripheries.

Indeed, postcolonial urban theorist Ananya Roy, who is part of the "arms-length Advisory Board" of the global suburbanism(s) project, focused in her contribution to the conference on concerns of the global—specifically "where is the global?"—rather than the concept of the suburb. It is also of note that Roy was a crucial part of the 2009 conference on *Peripheries: Decentering Urban Theory* held at the University of California at Berkeley. The conference sought to decenter urban theory from the global north to the global south through encouraging a move away from unitary concepts of periphery (and it can also be assumed suburb) to, as Hector Fernando Burga (2009) wrote, "…the formation of diverse expressions and possibilities." The *Suburban Revolution?* conference did not make the analytical case for expanding the concept of the suburb to the global south, and therefore globally, or for abandoning the term peripheries. This is problematic in a context in which the existing literature on peripheral urban spaces in the global south have decisively shifted away from the utilization of the suburb as a useful theoretical concept.

Nevertheless, the global suburbanism(s) project does provide a substantive range of empirical contributions from the global south that may well result in the establishment of new vocabularies, and provide the basis for extended urban theorizing. Significant research clusters for the global suburbanism(s) project have been established for Africa (South Africa, Tanzania and Ghana), India and China. The *Suburban Revolution?* conference represented the halfway point for the results achieved in these research clusters, in which presentations from Latin America were also included.

Largely missing from the global suburbanism(s) project and The *Suburban Revolution?* conference's topological imagination was substantive engagement with the Arab world.[3] Academics, and others, however, have not ignored the importance of the urban fringe in the Arab world and have forwarded important insights. The work on the Arab urban fringes have illuminated the dynamic relationships across governance, land and infrastructure—the three anchors of the conference—that have produced distinct outcomes and urban formations, inter alia, (refugee) camps, informal settlements, quasi-legal settlements, large-scale residential complexes, gated communities and peri-urban zones. The literatures on the urban fringes often note that they are thought of as misery belts, the result of sprawling unregulated and ungoverned urban growth driven by outsiders coming to the city. Such a view of the urban periphery seeks to stigmatize and maintain the urban periphery as unambiguously outside of the city, and less than, rather than fully, urban.

Existing work on the urban fringe of the Arab world is predominately focused on neoliberal urbanism. Of the rich, specifically their gated communities, which Timothy Mitchell's (1999) significant work "Dreamland: The Neoliberalism of Your Desires" paved the way for. And of the poor, in particular the rise of informal settlements, which Asef Bayat and Eric Denis' (2000) "Who Is Afraid of Ashwaiyyat? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt" investigated in their important foundational work. It is of note, that the literature on the urban fringe in the Arab world largely avoids the term "suburb." The work of de Koning (2001) is an important exception that directly engages the term suburb to analyze the urban fringe in Cairo. Another outlier is of course the work on the Arab world's perhaps most infamous "suburb," al-Dahiya, the southern neighborhoods of Beirut (see for example Mona Harb). Interestingly, Eric Denis in his essay "Cairo as Neoliberal Capital" locates the rise of gated communities as "bordering the city and the suburbs of Cairo," but does not specify what this interstitial space might be conceptualized as. The Arab world presents a broad range of experiences at the urban fringe, and forms of life that could potentially be part of the global suburban experience and also articulate important distinctions from it.

The conference and edited volume make it clear that getting out into and engaging with the urban peripheries is increasingly important to understand contemporary patterns and processes of social life. Whether, however, we can construct an idea of a global suburb remains to be answered. More work needs to be done not just in getting out into the suburb but also connecting existing literature on urban peripheries to the idea of global suburbanism(s). Trying to

assemble an idea, or a constellation, of the suburb from the disparate and fragmented global examples is no easy task, as the conference so powerfully articulated. It is hoped that over the remaining four years of the global suburbanism(s) project, the search for the global suburban constellation will be successful. The “suburb century” is yet to be established as an analytically substantive statement. The global landscape remains an urban form of stars, but maybe, just not yet in suburban constellation.

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[1] The conference *A Suburban Revolution?* was held on 26-28 September 2013 at the City Institute, York University (CITY), Toronto, Canada.

[2] For example, in March 2008, the University of Michigan held a conference on *Global Suburbs*, and in April 2008, the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech convened *A Suburban World? Global Decentralization and the New Metropolis*.

[3] The only contributions on the Arab world were my own presentation on "The Suburban Arab Spring?" and Oded Haas’ on "Suburban Occupation: Exploring ‘Colonization’ in Israel and Beyond."

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Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings: Downtown Cairo and the Fall of Mubarak

by Deen Sharp

Aug 06 2012

Listen

If the twentieth century in Europe was an urban century, then the twenty-first marks the transition to a global urban epoch. In 2008, the global urban and peri-urban population surpassed the rural for the first time in human history. Every week one million people move to urban areas. The rapid urbanization is bringing the world closer together in a vast series of urban hives. Within the cities themselves, however, inhabitants are growing further apart. Urban protest around the world – the Arab uprisings, Occupy Wall Street movement, Los Indignados – emphasized the centrality of urban space and place as sites for socio-political and economic change.

[Graffiti of Egyptians carrying cooking gas cylinders. Photo by Deen Sharp.]

The rapid urbanization of the globe has constructed cities that are formed not around the users of the urban space but for the imperative of profit making. The rich and powerful have attempted to construct and form an architecture and landscape of control and exclusivity that perpetuates their power and wealth. Increased social inequality has been carved into the spatial forms of cities across the globe. The inhabitants and users of a city may be innocent but the financers, politicians and professionals that construct a city never are.

To understand the Arab uprisings and the continued unrest in the region, it is critical to take an account of space, specifically the production of space and its processes. An analysis the Arab uprisings through the urban lens exposes the state elites' neoliberal capitalist and kleptocratic production of space and the everyday consequences of the high levels of concentrated wealth and power. Simultaneously, an urban analysis reveals the empowering and fascinating dynamic that occurred when, at the very moment the regimes seemingly finished their enclave cities, urban inhabitants coalesced in public spaces throughout the region, transcending class, religion, and ethnic divisions andbinding together their fragmented cities.

Indeed, the production of space in Cairo offers a particularly fascinating example of this phenomenon. Politicians and businessmen connected to the management and production of the built environment in Egypt were among the first and most prominent to be arrested following the 25 January 2011 uprising. Land deals by the government with private developers immediately came under scrutiny. The Mubarak regime produced a built environment through a cynical and prodigal framework.

At the core of the regime's spatial thinking was the goal to move the urban poor from the Nile valley to the desert. The Mubarak regime built upon the legacy of Anwar al-Sadat and his economic initiative of *infitah* ("the opening"). Downtown Cairo lay at the core of Sadat's neoliberal project, in which he desired to displace the current inhabitants to desert cities on Cairo's fringes and restore the center to a sanitized business zone. Mohamed Elshahed, author of the blog Cairo Observer, noted that Sadat envisioned replacing the inhabitants and their built environment in areas such as Bulaq with "a new business district to showcase Egypt's economic realignment with global capitalism."

Sadat failed to remove the urban residents of the center to the periphery. Mubarak, however, continued the onslaught on Bulaq and similar areas. And in post-Mubarak Egypt, attempts to remove residents from central Cairo have not stopped. Businessman Naguib Sawaris and the Shokshobi family, responsible for the inelegant Nile City towers, now threaten the Bulaq community with eviction. The recent violence at the site of the Nile City towers, which resulted in one death, did not happen in a vacuum, but is an inflection point in a larger battle between the urban poor of Bulaq and state and business elites over the right to the city.

Despite the forty-year battle to de-densify and peripheralize Cairo by the government and investors, the center did not hollow out and provide the space for global capital to fill. Bulaq and other informal areas have shown remarkable resilience against state attempts of planned dispossession and dislocation. When the government has succeeded in dislocating inhabitants of informal areas to desert cities the victory is often short lived. Residents of desert cities soon return to the center; the lack of adequate jobs, transport, and community in the desert cities leave them with little choice. Subsequently, Cairo continued its rapid expansion and densification.

The shift in government and private capital to the periphery resulted in a rapidly eroding urban fabric in the center and the increased informality of the built environment, as the state left urban residents to find their own solutions to resolve the housing crisis. The rise of informal settlements in Cairo has been remarkable and a direct response to the flight of the government from the center. Informal settlements are estimated to make up sixty-five percent of Cairo's built environment, around twelve million people, and the city is thought to have some of the highest urban densities in the world.

The absence of the state in informal areas has placed a heavy burden on the urban poor. The majority of informal areas are not connected to basic infrastructure and lack access to clean water, sewage, and other basic utilities. Residents in informal areas, nevertheless, have been active in organizing around activities where the state should otherwise be present. The neglect of the inhabited urban fabric and the focus of urban solutions on "clean slates" in the desert is part of a cynical political and economic strategy. Mubarak's regime sought through desert cities to transform the landscape and the built environment themselves into tools of domination and control.

Modeled on American suburbanization in the 1950s and inspired by developers such as Robert Moses (who redeveloped New York), Mubarak's urban scheme set to work to plan the massive dislocation of people from the restive political and integrated urban core to the quiescent and disconnected desert cities. The urbanization of Islamist movements, who had been able to fill the absence of the state in some informal areas, made this task all the more immediate. Cairo historian Nezar Seyyad noted, in his book *Cairo: Histories of a City,* "In neighborhoods such as Imbaba, constituted of dilapidated public housing surrounded by informal settlements, militant Islamic organizations like Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya have succeeded in penetrating and reorganizing the area's social fabric." Mubarak, it turned out, was right to fear the high densities and the rise of social movements among the urban poor.

Mubarak and his cronies grew distracted, however. The creation of the desert cities was not just a defensive political mechanism by the regime. It was also an opportunity to make a lot of money. In the 1990s, although the regime continued its policy of attempting to shift the urban poor to desert cities, a more capitalist approach was taken to build housing for the middle and upper classes. Dreamland, Utopia, Hyde Park, Madinaty [My City] and Beverly Hills, all gated communities for the middle classes and rich, emerged.

Land was sold to developers, often connected to state elites, at below market value, and the state built the infrastructure for the private developments – at huge cost to the taxpayer. This was also accompanied by neoliberal reforms that shifted state investment away from manufacturing, bakeries, social welfare, and infrastructure and into financers, cement and steel factories, and huge infrastructure projects in low-density fringe areas of the city. Urbanist David Sims wrote in his book *Understanding Cairo: The logic of a city out of control*,"… the suspicion is inescapable

that the real reason for the new towns and other desert projects around Cairo is to add to the speculative frontier, replenish the land resource needed for state patronage and continue to create conditions for profitable private schemes with little or no utility value."

The result of ignoring the utility value of desert cities is a desertification of the urban fabric. Urban poor evicted by the state from the center to the periphery, soon return once again to the center. Sixty-four percent of units in New Cairo, according to Sims, are vacant or closed. Thousands of houses have been built without the jobs for people to sustain them and miles of roads have been constructed for people without cars to drive on them. Despite the terrible traffic in Cairo, only fourteen percent of the population own cars. In the Egyptian economy, at all levels family and community networks are critical for employment opportunities; networks that few could afford to give up to live on the fringes of the city. Indeed, even if the urban poor wanted to move to the fringes, few could afford to.

The redirection of investment from the center to the periphery has created disastrous urban conditions for inhabitants of the city. But for those in power and investors it has produced what geographer Neil Smith terms the "rent gap": "A space where gentrification occurs in urban areas where prior disinvestment in the urban infrastructure creates neighborhoods that can be profitably redeveloped." The "rent gap" is when large-scale investors or developers invest in degraded areas on the basis of the gap between the actual rent and potential rent after rehabilitation. The original inhabitants are priced out of this new investment and subsequently displaced.

In the production of two $3.5 million project documents by the government before 25 January 2011—such as "Cairo vision 2050", which fed into "Vision of Cairo 2050" —the "rent gap" is realized. The winning proposal for the redevelopment of Downtown Cairo created gentrified space filled with Dubai-esque towers, luxury hotels, open-air museums, and green parks. Tahrir Square is reconfigured, into a destination landmark filled with shops, restaurants, entertainment, and cultural activities.

The current residents of Downtown Cairo are conspicuous by their absence in Cairo 2050. Indeed, under the title "Main Concept of the Vision" a red circle is drawn around Cairo and large arrows bounce out of the center that indicate the intention of, "redistribution of population all-over the region." At the very moment that the rich and powerful had devised a scheme to mainstream the idea of displacing and dispossessing thousands of Cairenes, at the very moment the neoliberal project of socially stratifying the city had ostensibly been completed, the city's populous united in open revolt in the heart of the city.

The urban poor, and in particular those threatened with violence, displacement, and dispossession, led the march to Tahrir Square. Areas such as Bulaq and Shubra came out as key to the facilitation of the January 25 2011 revolution. This huge "non-movement" to claim back the city and reconnect with the urban fabric, despite the spatial fixes of the state and capital, was critical to the magnetization of Tahrir Square.

The fusion of bodies in Tahrir Square and public squares throughout Egypt constructed an anti-Mubarak space. Not only a space of negation, Tahrir Square actualized a post-Mubarak space and revitalized the center of the city from a denied space to an active political place. Cairenes disrupted the established notions of who gets to shape the city. However, the remnants of the regime are working hard to ensure that the image of an alternative future to Egypt is not projected. The government agency, the General Organization for Physical Planning, is reportedly preparing Cairo 2052. Nevertheless, while the remnants of the regime create fantasias for the future and reminisce about the past, the right to the city is present.

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In answer to a question posed by @AlManakh on Twitter: "Is there any evidence Robert Moses inspired Mubarak? Curious to see a source?" As Farha Ghannam noted, in her book Remaking the Modern, there is a strong link to the thinking of city planners and policy makers in Egypt and Haussmann, Corb and Robert Moses.

Moses' imprint in Cairo 2050 is evident. I am not the first to state or see Moses' fingerprints in Cairo. Postcard #5 (http://cairobserver.com/post/11748668122/postcard-5) in the blog Cairobserver offers the image of Moses superimposed onto the new developments in Cairo on the Nile.

Nevertheless, further evidence/research should be dug up/carried out on the link between Robert Moses and the

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التحضّر والانتفاضات العربية: وسط القاهرة وسقوط مبارك

by Deen Sharp Sep 06 2012

أستمعُ

[غرافيتي من ميدان التحرير في القاهرة]

إذا كان القرن العشرين في أوروبا قرناً حضَرياً، فإنّ القرن الـ 21 يشير إلى مرحلة انتقالية عالمية نحو حقبة حضرية. ففي العام 2008، وللمرة الأولى في التاريخ، تجاوز عدد سكان المناطق الحضرية وشبه الحضرية عدد السكان الريفيين. ينتقل مليون شخص أسبوعياً للسكن في مناطق مدينية. التحضُّر السريع يجعل أجزاء العالم أقرب إلى بعضها، في ما يشبه سلسلة واسعة من الخلايا المدينية. غير أنه ضمن المدن نفسها، يزداد السكان تباعُداً.

التظاهرات حول العالم، من الانتفاضات العربية وحملة حركة "احتلوا وول ستريت"، وحركة "المستنكِرون" Los Indignados في إسبانيا، وكلها مدينية، أكّدت مركزية المساحة والمكانة الحضريّتين كمواقع للتغيير الاجتماعي ـ السياسي والاقتصادي.
أدّى التحضر السريع للعالم إلى بناء مدن لم تتأسّس حول مستخدمي الحيّز المديني، بل لخدمة ضرورات جني الأرباح. لقد حاول الأثرياء وأصحاب النفوذ بناء وتشكيل هندسة ومشهد عام للسيطرة وللحصرية، بشكل يؤبّد قوتهم وثروتهم. تمّ نحت انعدام العدالة الاجتماعية المتزايد داخل الأشكال المكانية للمدن في جميع أنحاء العالم. قد يكون سكّان ومستخدمو الحيّز المديني أبرياء، إلا أن المموِّلين والسياسيين والمحترفين الذين يبنون مدينةً لا يمكن أن يكونوا أبرياء أبداً.

لفهم الانتفاضات العربية والاضطراب المستمر في المنطقة، من المهم أخذ الفضاء الجغرافي في الاعتبار، وتحديداً إنتاج هذا الفضاء ومساراته. من شأن تحليل الانتفاضات العربية من خلال الزاوية المدينية أن يسلّط الضوء على إنتاج نخب الدولة الرأسمالية النيوليبرالية و"الكليبتوقراطية" (النهَّابة) للمساحة الجغرافية، وعلى النتائج اليومية للمستويات العالية من تمركز الثروة والقوة. وبشكل موازٍ، من شأن التحليل المديني أن يكشف عن الديناميكية التمكينية والمذهلة التي طرأت عندما التأم السكان الحضريّون، لحظة ظهر أنّ الأنظمة أنجزت تسييج وإقفال مناطقها المحظيّة، التأموا في أماكن عامة في كل المنطقة العربية، متجاوزين الطبقات والدين والانقسامات الاثنية، مؤمّنين الحماية لمدنهم المجزأة. في الواقع، إنّ إنتاج المساحة الجغرافية في القاهرة، يقدم مثالاً خاصاً ومذهلاً عن هذه الظاهرة. سياسيون ورجال أعمال مرتبطون بإدارة وإنتاج البيئة الاجتماعية القائمة في مصر، كانوا من أوائل وأبرز مَن تم اعتقالهم غداة انطلاق انتفاضة 25 كانون الثاني/يناير 2011. أصبحت عقود الأراضي التي تعطيها الحكومة لمقاولين من القطاع الخاص تحت المجهر فوراً. لقد أنتج نظام مبارك بيئة اجتماعية وديموغرافية من خلال إطار عمل "سينيكي" وباذخ.

في لبّ العقل "الجغرافي" للنظام المصري، كان هناك هدف نقل الفقراء الحضريين من وادي النيل إلى الصحراء. لقد بُني نظام مبارك على أساس ارث أنور السادات ومبادرته الاقتصادية القائمة على "الانفتاح". ويقع وسط القاهرة في صميم المخطط النيوليبرالي لمشروع السادات، الذي رغب بنقل السكان الحاليين إلى مدن صحراوية عند أطراف القاهرة، وترميم وسط المدينة لتكون منطقة "معقمة" مخصصة للأعمال التجارية.

وقد لاحظ محمد الشاهد، صاحب مدونة "cairo observer" أنّ السادات عقد النية على استبدال السكان وبيئتهم المبنيّة في مناطق كبولاق، ليُحلّ مكانهم "منطقة جديدة للأعمال لعرض إعادة تموضع الاقتصاد المصري مع الرأسمالية العالمية".

لقد فشل السادات في نقل السكان الحضريين من وسط القاهرة إلى الأطراف. غير أن مبارك واصل مشروع الهجوم على منطقة بولاق ومناطق مشابهة. وفي حقبة مصر ما بعد مبارك، لم تتوقف محاولات نقل السكان من وسط القاهرة. وقد قام أخيراً رجل الأعمال نجيب سويرس وعائلة شوكشوبي السعودية، أصحاب العمارات البشعة المسماة "أبراج النيل سيتي"، بتهديد سكان رملة بولاق المحاذين لها بطردهم من أرضهم. والعنف الذي وقع مؤخراً في المكان المقرر لبناء تلك الأبراج، والذي نتج عنه سقوط قتيل، لم يأتِ من فراغ، بل هو محطة فاصلة في معركة أوسع بين السكان الحضريين الفقراء لمنطقة بولاق من جهة، والدولة ونخبة رجال الأعمال من جهة ثانية، حول الحق في المدينة.

ورغم مرور 40 عاماً على بدء معركة تخفيف الكثافة السكانية للقاهرة وتحويل أحياء منها إلى الأطراف من قبل الدولة ومستثمرين، فلم يمكن خفض كثافة وسط القاهرة، ولم يفسَح المجال للرأسمال المعولم بأن يحتل مكان هؤلاء. لقد أظهر سكان منطقة بولاق ومناطق أخرى من عشوائيات القاهرة مقاومة ملحوظة في مواجهة المحاولات الحكومية المنهجية الهادفة إلى سلبهم الأراضي وتفكيكها. وحتى عندما نجحت الحكومة في اقتلاع سكان المناطق العشوائية ونقلهم إلى مدن صحراوية، فغالباً ما عاش الانتصار الحكومي لوقت قصير. ذلك أن سكان المدن الصحراوية سرعان ما عادوا إلى وسط المدينة. فالنقص في وجود وظائف مناسبة، وفي وسائل النقل، وفي الحياة الاجتماعية، لم يترك لسكان المدن الصحراوية خياراً سوى المغادرة. بالتالي، واصلت القاهرة تكثفها الجغرافي والديموغرافي السريعين.

إن انتقال الحكومة ورأس المال إلى الأطراف، أسفر عن تآكل سريع للنسيج الحضري في وسط المدينة، وعن ازدياد الطابع العشوائي للبيئة الاجتماعية القائمة، في وقت تركت الدولة السكان الحضريين ليجدوا حلولهم الخاصة لأزمة السكن. إنّ ازدياد المساكن العشوائية في القاهرة كان رداً مباشراً ولافتاً على مغادرة الحكومة وسط المدينة. تشير التقديرات إلى أن المساكن العشوائية تحتلّ أكثر من 65 في المئة من البيئة الديموغرافية الموجودة، ما يقارب 12 مليون شخص، وما يجعل القاهرة تسجل إحدى أعلى نسب الكثافة السكانية المدينية في العالم.

إنّ غياب الدولة في مناطق عشوائية، أرسى عبئاً ثقيلاً على الفقراء الحضريين. معظم المناطق العشوائية غير متصلة بالبنى التحتية الأساسية، وتعاني نقصاً في المياه النظيفة ومياه الصرف الصحّي، وتفتقد إلى مرافق أساسية أخرى. مع ذلك، فإنّ سكان المناطق العشوائية كانوا فعّالين في تنظيم أنفسهم حول نشاطات كان يجدر بالدولة أن تقوم بها. إنّ إهمال النسيج السكاني الحضري، وتركيز الحلول الحضرية على "القوائم النظيفة" في الصحراء، هو جزء من استراتيجية "سينيكية" سياسياً واقتصادياً. لقد عمل نظام مبارك، من خلال الصحراء، على تحويل المشهد العام والبيئة الاجتماعية والديموغرافية القائمة الى أدوات سيطرة وتحكُّم.

على غرار النموذج الأميركي لجعل الضواحي حضرية في أعوام الخمسينيات، وبوحي من مقاولين كروبرت موسيس (الذي أعاد تنظيم نيويورك)، فإنّ المشروع الحضري الذي طبقه مبارك هدف إلى التخطيط للانسلاخ الكثيف للناس عن النواة الحضرية المندمجة التي تتميز بالغليان السياسي، إلى المدن الصحراوية الهامدة وغير المتصلة بعضها ببعض. إنّ "تمدين" الحركات الاسلامية ـ وهو ما كان من شأنه ملء الفراغ الذي خلّفه غياب الدولة في بعض المناطق العشوائية ـ جعل من هذه المهمة أكثر إلحاحاً. ويقول مؤرخ مدينة القاهرة، نزار الصياد، في كتابه "القاهرة: تواريخ مدينة" (Cairo Histories of a City)، "في بعض الأحياء كإمبابة، التي تتألف من مساكن عامة خربة، تحيط بها مساكن عشوائية، نجح مناضلو المنظمات الإسلامية، كـ"الجماعة الإسلامية"، في اختراق النسيج الاجتماعي للمنطقة وإعادة تنظيمها". وقد تبيّن أنّ مبارك كان محقاً في الخوف من الكثافة السكانية الكبيرة، ومن صعود الحركات الاجتماعية بين الفقراء الحضريين.

إلا أنّ مبارك والمقرّبين منه كانوا مشتتين. لم يكن خلق المدن الصحراوية مجرد آلية سياسية دفاعية من قبل النظام، بل كان أيضاً فرصة لجني الكثير من الأموال. في أعوام التسعينيات، ورغم أن النظام واصل سياسته في محاولة إرسال الفقراء الحضريين إلى مدن صحراوية، اتُخذت مقاربة أكثر رأسمالية في بناء المساكن هناك للطبقات الوسطى والعليا في الصحراء. هكذا ظهرت مشاريع "دريم لاند" و"يوتوبيا" و"هايد بارك" و"مدينتي" و"بيفرلي هيلز"، وجميعها مشاريع سكنية خاصّة مسوّرة للطبقات الوسطى والثرية.

لقد تمّ بيع الأرض لمقاولين غالباً ما كانوا مرتبطين بنخب حكومية. وتمّ ذلك بقيمة أدنى من قيمتها المتداولة في السوق، ثم شيّدت الدولة البنية التحتية للمشاريع الخاصة وذلك بتكاليف هائلة على حساب دافعي الضرائب. وقد ترافق ذلك مع إصلاحات نيوليبرالية حرفت استثمارات الدولة بعيداً عن التصنيع والمخابز والرعاية الاجتماعية والبنى التحتية، لتضعها بين أيدي المموّلين ومصانع الاسمنت والحديد ومشاريع البنى التحتية الهائلة في المناطق الهامشية ذات الكثافة السكانية المنخفضة في المدينة. وكتب المتخصّص في الشؤون الحضرية دايفيد سيمز في كتابه "فهم القاهرة: منطق مدينة خارجة عن السيطرة" Understanding Cairo: The logic of a city out of control: "الشك لا مفر منه في أنّ السبب الحقيقي خلف بناء المدن الجديدة ومشاريع أخرى في الصحراء حول القاهرة هو توسيع حدود المضاربات (العقارية)، وسدّ النقص فيما يتعلق بموارد الأراضي اللازمة لسيطرة الدولة، ومواصلة خلق الشروط لمشاريع خاصة مربحة تحمل قيمة قليلة من حيث الفائدة أو لا تحمل أي قيمة حتى".

إنّ نتيجة تجاهُل قيمة الفائدة للمدن الصحراوية هي تصحير للنسيج الحضري. الحضريون الفقراء الذين طردتهم الدولة من وسط المدينة إلى الأطراف، يعودون سريعاً مجدداً إلى وسط المدينة. 64 في المئة من الوحدات السكنية في "القاهرة الجديدة"، بحسب دايفيد سيمز، هي فارغة أو مقفلة. الآلاف من المنازل تمّ بناؤها لأشخاص لا يملكون وظيفة تسمح لهم بالمحافظة على هذه المنازل، وتمّ شقّ أميال من الطرقات لأشخاص لا يملكون سيارات كي يقودوها على هذه الطرقات. ورغم أزمة ازدحام السير الرهيبة في القاهرة، فهناك فقط 14 في المئة من السكان يملكون سيارات. في الاقتصاد المصري، وعلى جميع المستويات، الشبكات الأسرية والمجتمعية بالغة الأهمية بالنسبة لفرص العمل. ومن يمكنهم التخلي عنها والعيش على هامش المدينة قلة. كما هم في الواقع قلةٌ مَن يمكنهم مِنَ الفقراء الحضريين الانتقال إلى الضواحي، ولو أرادوا ذلك.

إن إعادة توجيه الاستثمار من وسط المدينة إلى الأطراف، خلق ظروفاً حضرية كارثية لسكان المدينة. لكن بالنسبة لمن يمسكون بالسلطة وللمستثمرين، فقد أنتج ذلك ما سمّاه العالِم الجغرافي نيل سميث "فجوة الإيجار": "إنه مساحة، حيث التحسين يطرأ في مناطق حضرية يخلق فيها سحب الاستثمارات الجارية على البنى التحتية الحضرية، أحياء من شأن إعادة تطويرها أن يكون مربحاً". تحصل "فجوة الإيجار" حين يستثمر مستثمرون ومتعهدو بناء على صعيد واسع في مناطق أحوالها متدهورة على قاعدة الفارق بين الايجار الحالي والقيمة المحتملة للايجار بعد إعادة التأهيل. والسكان الأساسيون يتمّ إخراجهم من هذا الاستثمار الجديد، وبالتالي يتمّ تشريدهم.

لقد تحقّقت "فجوة الإيجار" في إنتاج الحكومة مشاريع قبل 25 كانون الثاني/يناير 2011، التي تبلغ تكلفة اعداد الوثائق لاثنين من بينهما 3,5 مليون دولار مرتين (كمشروع ""Cairo vision 2050 الذي تحوّل إلى "Vision of Cairo 2050"). لقد أدّى الاقتراح الفائز بمشروع إعادة تطوير وسط القاهرة إلى خلق مساحة شبه مخصصة للطبقات البورجوازية تملأها الأبراج المبنية على طراز أبراج دُبي، والفنادق الفخمة، والمتاحف المفتوحة في الهواء الطلق، والحدائق العامة الخضراء. بحسب هذا المشروع، ستتم إعادة تكوين ميدان التحرير ليكون واجهة تاريخية تملأها المتاجر والمطاعم ومحال التسلية والنشاطات الثقافية.

ووفق هذا التصور، فمن الواضح أن السكان الحاليين لوسط القاهرة سيغيبون عن وسط العاصمة في 2050. في الواقع، تحت عنوان "المفهوم الرئيسي للرؤية"، تمّت إحاطة كلمة القاهرة بدائرة حمراء، ووضعت أسهم كبيرة على وسط الشعار الذي يشير إلى النية بـ "إعادة توزيع السكان في كل المنطقة". في اللحظة التي وضع فيها الأثرياء والأقوياء مخططاً لتعميم فكرة تشريد وانتزاع ملكية الآلاف من سكان القاهرة، وفي اللحظة التي اكتمل فيها المشروع النيوليبيرالي القائم على التقسيم الاجتماعي للقاهرة، اتّحدت المدينة المكتظّة سكانياً في ثورة مفتوحة من قلب المدينة.

تقدّم فقراء المدينة، وتحديداً هؤلاء الذين جابهوا العنف والتشرد وانتزاع ممتلكاتهم، المسيرة نحو ميدان التحرير. وخروج مدن كبولاق وشبرة كان حاسماً في تسهيل ثورة 25 كانون الثاني/يناير 2011. هذه الحركة غير المنظمة التي قامت للمطالبة باستعادة المدينة، وبإعادة وصل النسيج الحضري فيها، رغم الوجود الملموس للدولة ولرأس المال فيها، كانت حاسمة في إعطاء الطابع الجاذب لميدان التحرير.
لقد تمّ بناء مساحة معادية لمبارك من خلال اندماج الأجساد في ميدان التحرير وفي الساحات العامة على طول البلاد. لم تكن هذه مجرّد مساحة للنفي والسلبية، بل جسّد ميدان التحرير مساحة لمرحلة ما بعد مبارك وإعادة إحياء وسط المدينة لتحويله من مكان ممنوع على العامة، إلى مساحة سياسية ناشطة. لقد عطّل سكّان القاهرة النظريات الموضوعة حول من يتولى تشكيل المدينة. لكن فلول النظام يعملون جاهدين لضمان ألّا تنتشر صورة بديلة عن مستقبل مصر. تشير التقارير إلى أن الوكالة الحكومية المصرية "الهيئة العامة للتنظيم العمراني" تحضّر للصورة العمرانية للقاهرة عام 2052! رغم ذلك، وفي حين يخلق فلول النظام صورتهم المستقبلية المتخيّلة، وذكرياتهم الماضوية، يبقى الحقّ بالسكن في المدينة حاضراً.
[نشر هذا المقال باللغة الإنكليزية على "جدلية" وقام ملحق "السفير العربي" بترجمته ونشره]

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Beware of Small Cities

by Deen Sharp Sep 06 2012

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[Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. Photo by Niqie.]

The physical spaces of the Arab uprisings emerged as powerful political tools in the course of the revolts for both protesters and regimes. Protestors in streets and squares affirmed that power also exists in real exchanges, in real places between real people. Tahrir Square experienced a metamorphosis from a denied political space to a metonym for revolution, a symbol of the Egyptian and Arab uprisings. The spatial dynamics of the uprisings, however, are not only in the streets and public squares of the major metropolises. Indeed, the protests antedate the move to public squares in capital cities.

Despite urban spaces outside the major metropolises remaining almost invisible in discourses surrounding the Arab uprisings, small cities played a critical role in the revolts in 2011, the year that changed the Middle East. Normatively, it is the spaces of the largest cities that are deemed to produce the region's history. Cairo, Beirut and Baghdad, and their ilk, do not form the realities for the majority of inhabitants in the Arab region, however. Urban morphologies of small cities, such as Sidi Bouzid, Suez and Dera'a, are closer to the everyday spatial realities of the majority of the regions inhabitants. The Arab uprisings have articulated how the neglect of areas outside the major metropolises hindered our understanding of human patterns of social life.

To differentiate and comprehend the morphologies of small cities, towns, peri-urban areas and villages, and thus engage with the daily spatial realities of the majority of inhabitants in the region, a correction to the under theorizing of areas outside big cities needs to be undertaken. The uprisings have brought to the fore the urgency of establishing a small cities research agenda for the region. Engagement with space beyond the metropolis would not only introduce new avenues to analyze the historical contexts and undetermined futures of the Arab uprisings but also engender an improved understanding of social life in the region more broadly. It took a fruit and vegetable vendor to instigate a region-wide revolution and depose the big men - Ben Ali, Mubarak and Saleh. It took small cities to awaken the larger

metropolis.

Arab Uprisings: Beyond the Metropolis

On 17 December 2010, Muhammed Bouazizi's self-immolation precipitated protests that spread throughout Tunisia and then the region. Bouazizi's protest suicide took place over 265 kilometers south of the capital in the small city of Sidi Bouzid. In Kasserine and Thala, the first violent crackdowns occurred and fuelled further protest throughout the country. Before the revolution reached Tunis on 8 January 2011, the protests spread from Sidi Bouzid to Bou Zayen, Jassrine, Thala, Ghafsa, Le Kef and Jendouba.

Jordan experienced the greatest unrest not in Amman, but Dhiban, a small city thirty kilometers south of the capital. The protests in Dhiban on 7 January, the first to occur in the region outside of Tunisia, spread a week later to the capital, Amman. The small city of Dhiban was not only a vector for protests, but provoked the emergence of a vibrant protest movement in the south of the country, a region perceived fiercely loyal to the King.

In Egypt, protests and organized labor strikes by urban social movements in smaller cities, such as Suez, Tanta, Mahalla, el-Dawwar, Ismailiyya, Port Said, Daqhaliyya and Aswan, were critical to the uprising and occurred before both the self-immolation of Bouazizi and the 25 January 2011 revolution in Tahrir Square. Even on 25 January, the move to public squares across Egypt did not start in Tahrir Square and emanate out. In the port city of Suez, for example, events developed faster than the rest of the country. Police in Suez used live ammunition against protesters and killed the first person on 25 January. The murderous reaction by police fueled further protest in Suez and around the nation.

The uprising against Qaddafi began not in Libyan capital of Tripoli, but in Benghazi. Yet, neither Benghazi nor Tripoli emerged as the central symbol of defiance against Qaddafi, Rather, it was the small city of Misrata, which during Libya's eight-month conflict endured the longest and bloodiest battle of the entire war. The fall of the small city of Sirte marked the end of Qaddafi's regime.

In Bahrain, protests in the hinterland around Manama had a history of demonstrations against the ruling Khalifa regime. Preceding the current uprising in December 2007, significant protests in the neighborhoods and villages around Manama had taken place. The protest in December 2007 resulted in a brutal police crackdown that produced further unrest and violence, and contributed to the march to the Pearl Roundabout in Manama in 2011. Clashes continue in the hinterland of Manama in municipalities such as Sitra and its villages.

Yemen's independent youth movement in Sana'a was critical to the uprising, but it did not act autonomously. Continued tensions between the north and south of Yemen, since reunification in 1990 was also pivotal. Protest movements, such as al-Hiraak al-Janoubi, in the small cities of the south have been critical to the emergence of the Yemeni uprising. The Houthi rebellion in the north and the northern small city of Saada also proved significant. Taiz, an important city in the central highlands of the country that had been persistently marginalized during Ali Abdullah Saleh's reign, was the first to rise in organized protest and struggled through the most violent counterrevolutionary measures of the uprising. While most of the spaces and narratives of the anti-regime uprising had been co-opted by the end of 2011, Taiz's independent movement sustained its nonviolent rebellion.

It was high school children's graffiti in the small Syrian city of Dera'a that provoked a violent reaction by the Syrian military, marking the start of the uprising there. Amal Hanano, in Outside the Walls, noted that the protests surged, "from the cities, Daraa, Hama, Homs, Deir al-Zor; the towns, al-Rastan, Jisr al-Shughour, al-Rakka, al-Qamishli; the villages, beautiful al-Jassem, witty Kafar Nubbul, and brave Anadan right outside Aleppo." Protestors in Syria started from everywhere, it seems, except the two central metropolises of Aleppo and Damascus.

The Arab uprisings powerfully demonstrate that history is not only shaped by the capital cities of the region, but also by highly complex and diverse set of spaces and actors, of which small cities make up a central, not peripheral, part. The connections of small cities, and the spaces outside the major metropolises more broadly, through bodies, (im)material flows and resources to metropolises and beyond need to taken seriously.

On Size

Size matters, but not in the ways some may think. Existing small city definitions around the globe vary greatly from country to country, and even within nation-states. The current lack of epistemological approaches and engagement with areas outside metropolises, however, by social scientists (among others), makes even a definition for small cities in the Arab region tenuous. Further, critical in thinking about urban space, large and small, is to be able to interrogate small cities both within and beyond the confines of size and Cartesian frameworks.

Urbanists David Bell and Mark Jayne argue, in thinking about how small is small, that size should not be absolute: "Smallness can be more productively thought of in terms of influence and reach, rather than population size, density or growth." Interrogating small cities is as much about the flows into and out of these spaces, especially with regard to exchanges with the center, than the physical space small cities occupy.

In much of the existing work on small cities both in the Arab region and globally, small cities are frequently defined in opposition to the big city. Government officials, but also many researchers, journalists and academics, suffer from an edifice complex in which the small city is defined as "other than" the big city. Small cities are rarely allowed to represent themselves. Subsequently, a small cities research agenda in the region should understand small cities within more horizontal frameworks and as important nodes in the networks between places of different scales.

Political scientist Janine Clark, offers a rare example of a more horizontal engagement with small cities, arguing that "[t]here is emerging evidence…that university students moving between Tunis and their hometowns in the periphery during their January vacation played an important role in the spreading of the protests." Intrinsic analogous structures and movements in small cities, rather than any perceived lack, must also be engaged with in researching and analyzing small cities.

Could, for example, the very "provincial" habits, customs and environments that have not been swept away and melted down into the image of the regime, and for which small cities are so often derided or condemned, be the very reason for their rise? As Lewis Mumford wrote in The City in History, "To rule merely by coercion, without affectionate consent, one must have the appropriate urban background." Could the space(s) of small cities, away from the major metropolises and symbolic sovereign power, enable residents to see, think and act upon the crevices of the regime?

No longer should it be possible for small cities to be brushed off as marked by conservatism and provincialism, immaterial to the events and discourses of the central metropolises and the Arab region. Ordinary cities and ordinary citizens matter and are ignored at the peril of those in power. The forces of history are likely smaller than we think.

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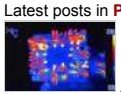

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FaDi Shayya ZahrDean · Teaching Fellow at The New School

Deen, I find your analysis critical, discursive and savvy. Understanding the spatial dimension of the Arab Uprisings is key in understanding what happened and its aftermath. Based on Žižek's explanation of violence, I believe that the Arab Uprisings have given way not only to throwing off regimes but also to ditch, deconstruct and challenge "violent" concepts and meanings that have been "violently" engraved in our heads.

On the one hand, rapid growth of metropolises and megalopolises has historically overshadowed the weight (and maybe existence) of the provincial and regional inhabited landsc... See More

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The End(s) of Stability

by Deen Sharp

May 08 2012

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[Solidarity in Sana'a, Yemen on March 6. Photo by Sallam/Creative Commons]

In September 2010, Saudi Arabia marked the anniversary of the 1962 Republican Revolution in Yemen by funding lavish parties in the country's capital. Large numbers of Yemenis thronged the Saudi Arabian embassy in Sana'a to collect the cash dispensed to commemorate this momentous occasion. Such a degree of profligateness in Saudi foreign policy is hardly new, but the pretence of solidarity demonstrated in their celebration of the Republican Revolution is particularly perplexing—even by Saudi standards of prevarication.

On 26 September 1962, a small group of army officers in North Yemen ended the thousand-year-old Imamate overnight and established the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). The Republican Revolution, supported by Nasserite Egypt, sparked a number of significant internal upheavals in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi monarchy survived those initial internal threats, and devoted itself to a rearguard counterrevolution, pitting its Yemeni royalists against the Egyptian-backed republicans in a brutal eight-year long proxy war. By 1970, the Saudi-supported counterrevolution had for the most part succeeded in "de-revolutionizing" the Republic and the Saudi monarchy has celebrated ever since.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia may mock history in its celebration of the 1962 revolution, but fifty years later North Africa's shadow has once again stretched into Yemen. The Arab uprisings that led to the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt in 2011, spurred the nascent Yemeni protest movement and led, eventually, to the removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Comparisons have frequently been drawn between the Arab uprisings and the revolutions in France in 1789, Europe in 1848, Prague Spring 1968, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989, and, on a few occasions, to the Arab revolt and the Egyptian Nasserite revolution in 1952. The 1962 Republican Revolution in North Yemen, however, has been largely overlooked. Much like the Yemeni uprising of 2011, the Republican Revolution, in the words of Gamal Abdul

Nasser, “exploded in one of the parts of the Arab world where it was least expected.” Important and underexplored parallels exist between the Republican Revolution of 1962 in North Yemen and the Arab uprisings, especially in the Yemeni case in 2011.

Before the 1962 revolution, North Yemen under Imamate rule represented the ideal type of Saudi-inspired stability. Lachrymose North Yemen was a convenient buffer zone between a verbose and increasingly gluttonous Saudi Arabia and a declining British presence in Aden. The Saudi-sponsored Hamid al-Din Imamate ran the country on the basis of personal rule and condemned its population to an impoverished serfdom-based system. The Imamate shut off the outside world from its citizens and banned new technologies such as radios.

North Yemenis were not quiescent to the oppressive rule of the al-Din Imamate. Political dissidents in 1938, for example, smuggled copies of al-Kawakibi’s The Nature of Oppression into the Imamate and plans to replace the Imamate formed. The Free Yemeni Movement, supported by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, produced a Sacred National Charter that envisaged a reformed constitutional Imamate. The Free Yemeni Movement’s push for reform [Islah], resulted in the assassination of Imam Yahya in 1948, but the planned coup failed. The Free Yemeni Movement had not communicated its ideas to the broader populous and the murder of Yahya was not supported. As Paul Dresch argued: “There was no general language yet in which a popular uprising could be encouraged.” Fourteen years later the right words emerged.

Egypt’s 1952 Revolution rippled across to the sequestered Imamate. Despite the isolation from the outside world imposed by the Imamate, the advent of the transistor radio resulted in the connection of urbanites and those in rural areas to regional and national political currents. The rise of Arab Nationalism and invention of the handheld transistor radio proved a fatal combination. Broadcasting from Nasserite Cairo, The Voice of the Arabs spread the idea that getting rid of the Imamate and establishing a republic instead was the solution to Yemen’s multiple problems, including the removal of the British from Aden.

The transformation of the communication environment in the Arab world is often viewed to have begun in the late 1990s, with the launch of satellite television and Al-Jazeera. The Republican Revolution of 1962 illustrated the pivotal role that radio played in unifying the Yemeni, and Arab, political space. Recent commentary has emphasized the role of social media, satellite television, and telecommunications in precipitating the uprisings. Indeed, a change in the information environment was a central vector in the 2011 Yemeni uprising.

However, in the emphasis on technological change and regional political currents, it is important, as in all the current uprisings, to not obfuscate indigenous political agitation and imagination. The Republican Revolution could not have received popular support without the groundwork of such groups as the Free Yemeni Movement in the 1930s. Likewise, the Yemeni uprising could not have coalesced around Saleh’s nepotism without the long resistance by, among others, Southerners, Houthis, and Yemeni youth. It is these popular political frameworks of change that are the phenomena and the regional and technological transformation the epiphenomena.

On 26 September 1962, Sana’a radio announced the death of Imam al-Badr and the news went viral. A group of Nasserite-backed North Yemeni army officers had directed tanks into Sana’a and shelled the offices of al-Badr. The radio, and its wily manipulation by the revolutionaries, shaped the attendant political outcome, namely that of the removal of al-Badr and the end of the Imamate. The report of al-Badr’s death was premature, but—unlike his grandfather—the announcement was welcomed by the populous. He had in fact escaped from the building and fled to the tribes in the north. Al-Badr’s bodyguard, Abduallah as-Sallal, took power and the Imamate was renamed the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR).

The Hamid al-Din dynasty met a remarkably similar end to that of Saleh’s thirty-three years at the helm. On 3 June 2011, a bomb exploded in the presidential mosque. Saleh’s opponents tried to repeat the trick of the 1962 revolutionaries and announced his premature end. President Ali Abdullah Saleh was badly wounded. Shrapnel had pierced his chest and he suffered serious burns. Not to be out-exaggerated, Saleh’s alive but raspy voice announced in an audio address to state television that he was “well and in good health.” Saleh was forced to leave Yemen for medical treatment in Saudi Arabia, and a few months later, to the United States.

Al-Badr and Saleh both bounced back from their reported deaths to haunt Yemen, with Saudi Arabian and US acquiescence. In the case of al-Badr, he formed a Saudi-supported militarized royalist campaign, backed by northern tribes, against the Nasserite assisted republicans. The geopolitical cleavage between the United States and the Soviet Union, manifested regionally between the Arab monarchies and Arab nationalists, produced a brutal proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Saleh’s re-emergence in Yemen occurred despite the warnings that his return could spark civil war. Indeed as the new

post-Saleh government gradually removes his family members from positions of power and in particular the military, Saleh threatens chaos. Given the Obama administration's stability-focused policy framework, it is not apparent why Saleh was permitted to return to Yemen from his luxurious pad(s) in the United States in February 2012.

In both the Republican Revolution and the Arab uprisings, US policy vacillated. In 1962, official US recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic was swiftly granted, but the initial support soon transitioned into support for the Saudi-led counter-revolution. In 1965, in response to the republican revolutionary threat, a joint US-British deal with Saudi Arabia marked the largest military export deal at the time. In a striking parallel, the current Arab uprisings also resulted in a record arms deal: in 2010, the United States and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement worth sixty billion dollars.

The initial US reaction to the Republican Revolution, however, was calculated to distance itself from the British and Saudi escalation of the conflict. A prescient early US assessment claimed that both the British and the Saudis were not upholding their agreement to not arm the royalists and noted that Saudi gold and arms kept the "tribal pot bubbling." Indeed, the British covert arming of Saudi Arabia in this period set the precedent of privatized military warfare. Colonel David Stirling—the prototype for later characters such as Erik Prince (founder of Blackwater)—established a private mercenary force and was pivotal in sealing arms deals for British arms manufactures, such as, BAE Systems.

Continued pressure by the United States led to a ceasefire in the conflict and a United Nations (UN) Yemeni Observer Mission was deployed. The weak UN mission soon collapsed and the battle between Yemeni royalists and republicans was enveloped within the brutal proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. While Saudi Arabia poured large amounts of money and provided weapons to al-Badr and his royalist campaign, the Egyptian army stationed sixty thousand troops in Yemen to support the YAR. Military planners in Cairo had dreamt of a presence on the Arabian Peninsula. The military and political hubris in support of the YAR, however, precipitated the end of Nasser.

Fear of the communist threat turned US policy toward Saudi Arabia and Britain. In March 1963, Egyptian bombing of royalist positions in Saudi Arabia and internal dissent in the Saudi military resulted in Operation Hard Surface that sent US planes and warships to support the Saudi monarchy. Meanwhile, the symmetrical proxy war frayed as it filtered down to the actual site of violence: North Yemen. Yemenis picked their global and regional supporters predominantly on the basis of vacillating local antagonisms; the result was a directionless slaughter.

In 1967, after Israel defeated Egypt and ended the Nasserite era, Egypt withdrew its support from Yemen. Saudi Arabia had won the war against Nasser. Royalists circled the now Nasserite-less Republicans in Sana'a, but were unable to recapture the capital. Saudi Arabia, victorious against Nasser, no longer needed al-Badr and sought the swiftest resolution to the conflict in Yemen. Subsequently, the Saudi monarchy dropped any ideological pretence it had for al-Badr and facilitated a Republican victory, sent al-Badr into exile, and imposed "stability" on the YAR. The Saudi system of "stability" for the YAR— which is on going—established a policy that pumped large quantities of cash through a complex network of overt and covert payments to prominent Yemeni tribal sheikhs, politicians, religious leaders, and army officials. It is a policy that both supports and undermines the state, just as it both supports and undermines the tribal system. Yemenis continue to pay for Saudi Arabia's policy in Yemen through personalized rule, malfunctioning state institutions, and a violent local political scene. The Houthi rebellion in the north, coupled with the secessionist movement and the al-Qaeda insurgencies in the south, are rooted in the Saudi policy of "stability."

The defeat of Nasser enabled Saudi Arabia to enforce policies of "stability" throughout the region. US policy has continued to lead from behind this Saudi Arabian framework, as has been articulated through the US response to the Arab uprisings. The Obama administration has simultaneously supported Saudi Arabia's clunking fist in the Arab uprisings and struggled to maintain a visual distance from it. In the Yemeni uprising this meant that the Obama administration condemned the killing of pro-democracy protestors by Saleh's government verbally. Yet, no meaningful consequences for these deaths or, indeed, a shift in support for the Saleh regime occurred. The United States only abandoned Saleh once the Saudis decided he was no longer able to enforce "stability" on Yemen.

The threat, or the semblance of a threat, in the form of al-Qaeda and Iran bring added regional and international complexity, and has ostensibly tightened the embrace of Saudi Arabia and the United States. In North Yemen where the Nasserites arrived in 1962, the Saudis now see the Iranian hand trying to threaten their Kingdom. Despite the lack of evidence, Saudi Arabia and the United States have both been keen to push the spurious claim that Iran is supporting Houthi rebels on the Kingdom's porous southern border. As the New York Times informs its readers: "[T]hey practice a quasi-Shiite form of Islam that makes them natural Iranian allies." The sectarian claim that Zaidi Shiites, quite different from Iranian Shiites, are natural Iranian allies is one Saudi Arabia would like to see promoted. As occurred in Bahrain and across the region, sectarianism, terrorism, and the Iranian threat have been useful tools in Saudi Arabia's counter-revolution.

Reflecting Saudi Arabian visions of Iran, the United States sees the presence of al-Qaeda everywhere. Al-Qaeda in

the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is seen as the primary terrorist threat to US national security, despite some analysts' claims that the group comprises no more than seven hundred militants. Since the uprising, AQAP has expanded its territory in Yemen, as US trained and equipped Yemeni forces withdrew from the south and abandoned the fight against al-Qaeda to protect the Saleh regime in the capital. Numerous commentators have stressed that the counter-terrorism centric approach of the US administration is actually exacerbating the terrorist threat.

The transformation of Yemen into a "civil state" [dawla madaniyya], as called for by the uprising, is viewed as critical to effectively counter terrorism in Yemen. The United States and the international community are not willing—or believe they are unable—to support the protesters' demands for change due to the inevitable violent transformation of the political order that would ensue. Just as in the 1962 Republican Revolution, regional alliances once again take precedence over the support of aspirations for good governance. The logic of authoritarian-imposed stability remains the approach through which the threat posed by Yemen to international interests can be controlled, despite the challenge the uprisings have posed to this schema.

The United States endorsed the Saudi-backed Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative, and as in 1962, the UN and the broader international community followed suit. The GCC Initiative removed Ali Abdullah Saleh from the presidency after thirty-three years, but his continued presence in Yemen suggests the perpetuation of a Saudi Arabian policy of keeping the "pot bubbling." A contemptuous one-candidate election was held and Saleh's vice-president was "elected" the new president of Yemen. Saudi Arabia fears a strong, democratic, and united Yemen. However, although Saudi is deeply concerned about the Arab uprisings, it does not perceive the Yemeni uprising as a serious revolutionary threat.

Saudi Arabia is cognizant of the numerous militarized, fractious, and independent groups in Yemen. Ali Abdullah Saleh, in an oft-repeated cliché, referred to his method of ruling Yemen as "dancing on the heads of snakes." Saleh was a reliable client for Saudi in keeping the Yemeni scene bubbling but not boiling over. However, just as al-Badr was abandoned by the Saudi monarchy when he outlived his usefulness in their self-preservation, so was Saleh when the protest movement coalesced around the removal of his regime and he could no longer maintain the desired "stability." According to Yemeni sources, Saleh is now working on a memoir entitled "My Story with Snakes."

The removal of Saleh by the GCC Initiative is aimed at returning Yemen to its previous state of inertia under Saleh. The Saudi monarchy's current dilemma in the transition to a post-Saleh era is how to return Yemen to Saleh-esque stability without Saleh. Wealth and power is highly concentrated in a few individuals in Yemen and the uprisings across the region have exposed the fragility of rule based on concentrated power. The GCC plan in Yemen is a challenge to the resilience of the Yemeni protest movement, as the Saudi counter-revolutionary strategies across the region will test the resilience of the Arab uprisings.

The Yemeni protesters are conscious that in their call and aspirations for strong state institutions, they are not only up against the Saleh regime and his family and the multiple fissures in the local political scene. They also have to fight the Saudi Arabian and international community schema of "stability," imposed by Saudi since the end of the civil war in 1970. Protesters changed the name of the central square outside Sana'a University, the epicentre of the Yemeni uprising, from Freedom Square to Change [Taghyir] Square. Freedom has largely disappeared from the revolutionary vocabulary and the language of change is everywhere. Yemenis are not going to be able to overthrow the Saudi-US strategy of "stability," as swiftly as they toppled Saleh or as the Republicans killed the Imamate. Yemenis need to be steadfast in their push for change. Indeed, their continued presence in Change Square and willingness to fight, despite the odds, has illustrated their resilience. For the first time since 1962, the outline of a different Yemen, a changed Yemen, is visible.

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