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Notes on Urban Politics in the Arab Region

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The study of urban politics and space in the Arab world continues to gain interest among scholars with different interdisciplinary backgrounds and experiences. In their work, they apply diverse social science and critical urban studies approaches to understand some of the dramatic changes affecting cities across the region. Many of the cities and public spaces in the region share common historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political organizational structures. However, the changing nature of domestic politics, neoliberal economic pressures as well as growing acute inequalities, civil strife and aggravating environmental conditions are profoundly transforming their built environments.

On October 25, 2022, The Arab Political Science Network (APSN) and The Beirut Urban Lab (BUL) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) organized a webinar focusing on the latest research and developments in the study of urban politics and space. Three scholars were invited to discuss the resilient and changing dynamics and configurations of power in cities and built environments of the Arab region. They reflected on questions of power and contestation, representation, and appropriation of urban space among other issues: [Sarah el-Kazaz](#) (Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics of the Middle East at SOAS, University of London), [Rafeef Ziadah](#) (Lecturer in Politics and Public Policy in the Department of International Development, King's College London), and [Omar Sirri](#), an independent scholar focusing on securitization, the city and the state.

The discussion revolved around four broad sets of questions examining (i) disciplinary approaches and debates on urban politics in the region; (ii) governance actors and modalities of action; (iii) everyday lives and access to services amidst conditions of wealth concentration, inequalities, crises, and violence; (iv) organized struggles for social and environmental justice, against the odds of rising authoritarianism and repression, and in the absence of systems of accountability. Speakers responded to our first question, reflecting on the disciplinary field of urban politics and why they believe research questions investigating the built environment and cities matter to the study of power and politics.

Taking stock of their reflections during the webinar, one can notice a strong interest in infrastructural spatiality, territorialities and urbanisms, across scales. Through the analysis of transport infrastructures and logistics chains across the GCC (and beyond), Rafeef Ziadah discusses how state power is being reconfigured beyond national boundaries and trade routes to engage with militarism and humanitarianism. Her work astutely shows how spatiality dis-/re-/connect places, cities, regions and states, reshuffling power and economic geographies.

Sarah El Kazaz's intervention invites us to "displace" the typical lens through which MENA politics are investigated—what she terms "weighty politics," i.e. the politics of parties, social movements, unions, and protests, towards the study of less explored terrains of investigation which have become fertile terrains for local politics. Her field of study is the practice of urban planning and design in Cairo, which constitutes a forum where subjective political affective experiences vividly appear, shaping a contested and fragmented political field, often constraining organizing and collective action, and perhaps at the expense of radical politics—yet worthy of attention.

In his note, Omar Sirri also shifts our attention to the infrastructural and the less studied aspects, but in quite different ways than his colleagues. His work questions the notion of scale as a unit of analysis and thinking and favors instead an ethnographic approach focused on objects and materiality of/in

the city—namely the military checkpoints of Baghdad. For him, thinking the urban-political is made productive through the “spatial entanglements” that are materialized in such objects/things as well as in the social and political forces and modes of governance associated to them.

The Arab region today is dominated by acute inequalities as well as by repressive and authoritarian modes of governance that are successfully toppling and undoing collective action attempts and struggles for rights and justice—as experienced in several countries in recent years, such as the Lebanese uprisings in 2019, and more recently, in Tunisia. Such struggles unravel effectively in the arena of urban and environmental politics, which seem to form terrains where local politics are able to endure—likely because of their technical and professional rhetoric, which can obscure political underpinnings. True, such politics are not radical and “weighty,” they are often messy, contradictory, disjointed, transient, partial, contingent, and fragmented—and they often lead to what can be qualified as entrepreneurial outcomes, with little impacts on the hegemonic political and moral order, especially in the context of increasing polycrises and disasters. Yet, given the restricted horizon of the larger urban political, I would cautiously call for an urban politics of the interstitial and the peripheral as an alternative to the overwhelming condition of despair and anxiety ruling the Arab region, and the world.

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Rafeef Ziadeh: My research has largely focused on the politics of transport infrastructures and logistics chains. I study maritime ports, but also associated infrastructures of roads, rail, airports and logistic cities, as they act to transform the economic geography of multiple regions. Although there's an increasing interest in studying infrastructures as a fundamental aspect of the built environment, what some have labelled the “infrastructural turn”, I would argue this work is much more advanced in the fields of Geography and Anthropology than it has been in Politics and International Relations. So, I am hoping to centre infrastructures and logistics in the study the politics of states and regional integration. Geographically, my focus has been on the Gulf Cooperation Council states, particularly tracing the ways the United Arab Emirates has been expanding its logistics space nationally, regionally and transnationally.

Critical infrastructure studies often highlight the concept of ‘black boxing’ – the idea that we normally don't notice how infrastructures function, except in times of infrastructural failure. When we look at waves of contestation in the Middle East recently, many of them have focused on key infrastructural failures and/or on equitable access to infrastructures, whether it's access to electricity, transport or water etc. Therefore, understanding the geopolitics of infrastructures, including why states and corporations are constructing them and to whose benefit, and who is doing the construction labour, are all crucial to the study of Politics today.

Maritime infrastructure in particular, is playing a significant role in shaping International Relations, considering what some have called the “infrastructural scramble”, with states competing to build logistics networks and control trade routes. For example, the United Arab Emirates is investing extensively in maritime ports across East Africa, reshaping connections between states, but as importantly, reshaping how new port cities are being constructed in the interest of trade and market-led development.

Finally, when tracing these infrastructural networks, the increasing overlap between the infrastructures of trade, militarism and aid becomes obvious. Many of the existing logistics networks and corporations cohered around the war in Iraq and the US military's need for mega-ports. Humanitarian networks are increasingly relying on the same logistics networks and private logistics companies for their aid delivery. One of the spaces I have studied for example is ‘Dubai Humanitarian

City', although hardly remarked upon outside the humanitarian sector, it is the largest logistics hub of humanitarian supplies regionally. In short, there is much research to be done on the overlap in the logistical cartographies of trade, militarism and humanitarianism and what this means for those states heavily invested in controlling these emergent networks.

Sarah El Kazaz: My research over the past few years has centered around three focal areas: political economy, scientific expertise, and urban-infrastructural spatialities. The first and forthcoming book, *Politics in the Crevices: Urban Design and (Un)Making Property Markets in Cairo and Istanbul* is at its core asking: what do we learn about the politics of neoliberalism if we look at it from the vantage point of the city? In tackling this question, I sought to bring together conversations in political economy, science, society and technology studies (STS), urban studies, and ethnography.

The book builds on the richness of those fields as well as a frustration with several tenets that had dominated (if not exclusively) and limited these conversations. Political economy scholarship turned to a circumscribed set of *familiar* sites of redistributive politics to understand neoliberalism that ultimately produced consensus around neoliberalism as an uncontested and politically-vacuous dispossessive project. The study of the urban in political science was overwhelmingly focused on urban lived experiences of political contestation and anti-authoritarian agitation in the Middle East, but didn't pay enough attention to how the urban built environments within which that contestation occurred were themselves being made and transformed through circuits of capital and logistics networks, expertise, disaster and so on. Finally, within the study of architecture and urban planning, expertise and social engineering were mostly seen as extensions of state projects and power rather than multi-layered and contested practices.

Starting from a commitment to looking for redistributive politics in unfamiliar sites, the book troubles these dominant tenants to ultimately argue that careful urban planning and design are being deployed in Middle Eastern cities to re-create a vibrant terrain of redistributive politics that many had argued was flattened with neoliberalism. In tracing how redistributive politics is playing out through quiet and subtle urban design practices, however, it unmasks how weighty political struggles around class, religion and corruption have become displaced away from traditional political forums and onto the contested design and lived-affective experiences of the city's intimate, private and invisible crevices. Burdening the city's crevices with the weight of that politics proves more elusive to recuperate as a polity and instead creates a suspicious and festering political climate that paves the way for conspiracy and polarization.

Continuing to seek politics where we least expect it, my second book project again marries political economy, geography and STS by following digital infrastructures, especially the Cloud, across the Global South. The project seeks to privilege a spatial-material-affective study of the soft and hardware mobilizing the Cloud as a lens into how the digital revolution is transforming our imaginations and lived experiences of "the economy" as a field of power. Through both projects I see the marriage of the fields of political economy, STS and urban-infrastructural geography as incredibly powerful in unmasking the political.

Omar Sirri: My research over the last few years has centered around three themes or areas: securitization, the city and the state. My current book project, which grew out of my doctoral dissertation, is an ethnography of security checkpoints in contemporary Baghdad. Checkpoints became ubiquitous in Baghdad in the wake of the US and UK-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. They were set up and operated by the US military and their control was slowly transitioned to Iraqi authorities and security institutions, primarily Baghdad Operations Command, established in late 2006. While most of the hundreds of checkpoints have over years slowly been removed, many still persist.

What led me to the checkpoint was not so much more common political science questions around political violence, such as how and why civil wars erupt, or when and why people switch allegiances during such events. The checkpoint instead became my object of study because of how they are lived socially, experienced in the everyday. Most of the city's residents have lamented checkpoints as incapable of engendering urban security. They often point to both spectacular and mundane forms of violence over years as proof of checkpoint ineffectiveness.

Part of what I argue in my work is that even while struggling to produce physical security, Baghdad's checkpoints remain integral to helping produce state authority. In my work, the city, and the people and things that help comprise it, become an entry point into determining how political authority forms, even when it consistently lets us down. As much as I look at a specific security architecture in a discrete city, I think investigating urban space and materials also helps us see, more broadly, the limits of delimits—that is, the need to push back on the idea that the checkpoint and the city are circumscribed sites and spaces. While I work on urban politics, my ethnographic methods and findings have pushed me away from thinking topographically, away from, for example, deploying scale as a unit of analysis.

I instead try to examine conditions more relationally, 'topologically,' to explore how a range of social forces inside and outside a city ultimately work across spaces and geographies. In other words, spatial entanglements produce and are produced by modes of governance that are not so much bounded by lines on a map, urban or otherwise, but instead sometimes form through the blurredness of those lines, or their altogether erasure.

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