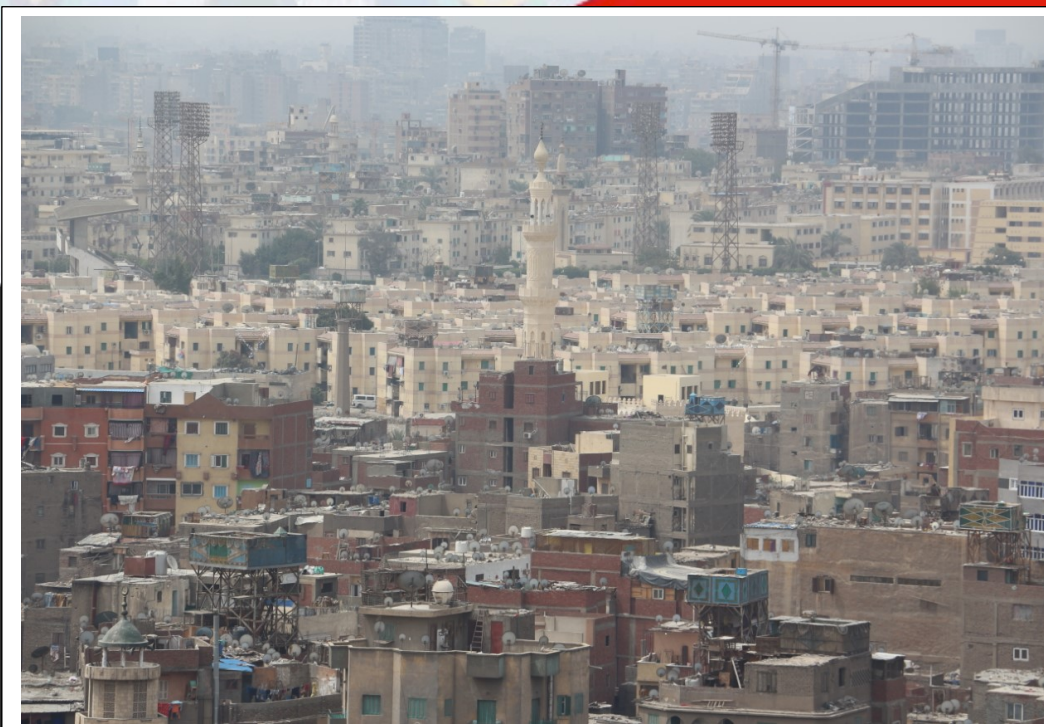




SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies &
De-sectarianisation



Political economy of infrastructure in the Middle East and North Africa

Javier Guirado (ed.)



SEPAD

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Introduction

Javier Guirado, Georgia State University

Infrastructure is usually defined as the set of facilities that enable the connection of different spaces, enabling the interaction and movement of people and goods.¹ Therefore, in the Middle East, a key player in its political economy and how it impacts its populations.

However, the notion of infrastructure can be expanded and refined according to different conceptual frameworks, from more classic ideas of land, maritime, and air transportation (i.e. roads, ports, airports), to questions about digital infrastructure (access to the internet, social media, smart cities), or heritage and culture. It can also expand towards theoretical revisions that signal a “hidden” or even “subaltern” infrastructure that goes beyond institutionalized ideas of facilities.² Also, the spatiality or design of infrastructure can imply exclusion often along social, political, economic, ethnic, or religious lines. Infrastructure, hence, becomes a crucial political tool for the political and the corporate elites, and a contentious space for different populations.³

Infrastructure in the Middle East, as well as its development and destruction, has recently been a source of new and intense debate. Developments like those in the ports of Jebel Ali or Khalifa in the United Arab Emirates; the Saudi megaproject of NEOM; the construction of New Cairo, a new capital for Egypt; or the new port of Tanger-Med in Morocco are part of a wide trend of massive-scale investment in infrastructure. Other contexts show a very different picture, like Lebanon, where the collapse of an already weak state has led to the impossibility of providing basic services like water or electricity to its residents; or Syria and Iraq, where the aftermath of war and foreign invasion has meant important problems in delivering such services.

So, what do these regimes of deliverance (or lack of thereof) mean for the lives of those served by this infrastructural fabric? Who owns these new developments? What problems emerge with the destruction of infrastructure? Who is responsible for its reconstruction?

¹ For an overview on the topic, see Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 42 (2013), pp. 327-43

² Swati Chattopadhyay, *Unlearning the City: Infrastructure in a New Optical Field*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012)

³ See AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Urban Life in Four African Cities* (Durham, NC: University Press, 2004); Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land. Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007); Stephen Graham, *Disrupted Cities. When Infrastructure Fails* (London: Routledge, 2010); Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011); or Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade. Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*. (London: Verso, 2020)

To answer these questions, this report explores case studies in countries ranging from Morocco to the United Arab Emirates, today or in the past few decades. Deen Sharp explores how reconstruction efforts in Lebanon have experienced problems in terms of social justice and exclusion; Sharri Plonski tells the story of Ma'an, once a vibrant hub of freight transport in Jordan whose decline was the result of shifting economic regimes after the fall of Ottoman empire; Ingy Higazy traces the history of the Ring Road in Cairo, a key piece of urban infrastructure, and its relation to urban justice and urban mobility in Egypt; Simon Mabon deals with the contentious politics of the Bahraini protests of 2011 and its aftermath, and how highways and bridges played a key role for the protesters and the regime; Blanca Camps-Febrer provides an account of how Free Economic Zones (FEZs) in Tangier explain the relationship between the private security sector, sovereignty, and population in the Moroccan context; and finally, Javier Guirado explores the newly formed alliances that the UAE, Pope Francis, and other international organizations have created to intervene in the reconstruction of Mosul, where heritage sites were torn down by the Islamic State.

This report is the result of a workshop organized by Javier Guirado and Simon Mabon at Lancaster University on 20 June 2022.

Revolt Toward Reconstruction in Lebanon

Deen Sharp, London School of Economics

*In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing.
About the dark times.*

Bertolt Brecht, *The Svenborg Poems*, 1939

In the aftermath of the explosion of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate that sliced through Beirut on August 4, 2020, Lebanon's inhabitants are confronted with the question, yet again, of what it means to "reconstruct." The blast killed over 200 people and caused extensive damage to the east of Beirut.⁴ It ruined hundreds of buildings and displaced thousands of people. The reconstruction in the explosion's wake will be the fourth major rebuilding attempt in Beirut since the 1970s and at least the sixth for the country at large.⁵ Lebanon is trapped, it seems, in a never-ending cycle of construction, destruction, and reconstruction.

I argue that a historical reading of reconstruction processes in Lebanon illuminates how they are part of the problem, entangled in mechanisms of violence, dispossession, and extraction. It situates the current efforts in their historical context to further highlight how reconstruction is only secondarily technical. First and foremost, it is a political and social act. To "reconstruct" Lebanon, if we are to embrace and reclaim the positive connotation of that term, means not only sweeping up shattered glass, producing technical assessments of structural damage, and physically rebuilding homes, offices, and shops. The necessary work also involves repairing both relationships between divided communities and corroded political structures, rebuilding social relations, and creating a vision of a shared project for the nation. Several scholars have noted how the civil war produced a particular urban project in Beirut that killed any prospect of an open and plural city.⁶ Joanne Nucho, for instance, has detailed how in Lebanon networks of urban infrastructures, institutions, and services produced particular notions of sectarian belonging and community.⁷ Militias used the provision of basic urban services as a strategy to control and intimidate both their "own"

⁴ Order of Engineers and Architects, Beirut. *Déclaration Urbaine de Beyrouth* (October 2020), <http://tousurbains.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/De%CC%81claration-Urbaine-de-Beyrouth-FINAL-FR.pdf>.

⁵ In the course of the Civil War in Lebanon (1975-1991) there were three major reconstruction efforts, in 1977, 1983 and 1991. For a full account of these reconstructions, see my paper: Deen Sharp, "Urban Violence in War and Peace: Lebanon's Reconstruction," *Geography and Environment Discussion Paper Series*, (August 2020). Lebanon has also undertaken significant reconstructions following the July 2006 war and the destruction of the Nahr el-Bared Camp in northern Lebanon.

⁶ Éric Verdeil, "Reconstructions manquées à Beyrouth: La poursuite de la guerre par le projet urbain," *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, (2001) 91: 65-73; Nasser Yassin, "Violent Urbanization and Homogenization of Space and Place: Reconstructing the Story of Sectarian Violence in Beirut," *World Institute for Development Economics Research* (2010).

⁷ Joanne Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017).

population and “others”. Protest, political organizing, producing alternative political and social imaginaries and practices, and holding the powerful to account are all central to a successful reconstruction process: To ensure that the rebuilding process is aimed toward building open and plural urban space rather than closed and sectarian communities. Repairing Lebanon’s built fabric and its political architecture (e.g., the constitution, voting rights, accountability, freedom of thought and speech) must be attended to simultaneously.

The weaponization of urban reconstruction processes and its political import that I detail in Lebanon is part of a broader phenomenon of the urbanization of violence and conflict. Military analysts and scholars have noted that warfare became increasingly urbanized over the course of the 20th century.⁸ Notably, scholarship on the urbanization of violence and conflict points not only to the destruction of the built environment. It has shown how contemporary urban warfare can include a range of policies and practices that construct, design, and organize the built environment, including discriminatory planning and building regulations; the restriction and use of certain materials, such as cement; the introduction of surveillance systems; the construction of “steel rings” or checkpoints; and the construction of infrastructure and logistical systems, such as roads and tunnels. Warfare not only results in the destruction and eradication of urban life; it can also lead to the extension and intensification of urbanization and the transformation of built fabrics. The construction of the built environment, as much as its destruction, has been central to many contemporary conflicts.⁹

Reconstruction and the Urbanization of Conflict

Lebanon’s current economic malaise is rooted in the period following the official end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 and the reconstruction process itself. Budget deficits in the country have averaged over 11 percent since 1999, producing a debt-to-GDP ratio of over 150 percent in 2019 that increased another 8 percent in 2020, from \$85 billion to \$92 billion.¹⁰ Many factors led Lebanon to this undesirable status, but the most central has been the reconstruction process that was officially launched soon after the formal end of the conflict. The creation of massive debt through reconstruction is notable given the fact that the Lebanese state was unable to take on large levels of debt during the civil war years. At

⁸ Stephen Graham, ed. *Cities, War, And Terrorism: Toward an Urban Geopolitics* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004); David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013); Alec Wahlman, *Storming the City: U.S. Military Performance in Urban Warfare from World War II to Vietnam* (Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2015).

⁹ See my own work in the context of the Levant: Deen Sharp, “Urbicide and the Arrangement of Violence in Syria,” in Deen Sharp and Claire Panetta, *Beyond the Square: Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Urban Research 2016); Deen Sharp, “Urban Violence in War and Peace: Lebanon’s reconstruction,”; Michael Sorkin and Deen Sharp, eds., *Open Gaza: Architectures of Hope* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press and Terreform, 2021).

¹⁰ Sharp, “Urban Violence in War and Peace,” 6.

the start of the 1990s, the Lebanese state had little to no debt burden, but by the end of the decade, the state was firmly on an exponential trajectory that would soon result in an exceptionally high debt-to-GDP ratio. Where did this money go?

In 1994, the government launched a state-backed urban development corporation called the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of the Beirut Central District s.a.l. (or “Solidere,” from its French name: *SOciété Libanaise pour le DÉveloppement et la REconstruction*), which was meant to lead the reconstruction of downtown Beirut and spearhead a national reconstruction plan.¹¹ Ownership of that whole area was transferred to the corporate entity. Downtown property owners were given shares in the corporation listed on the newly reestablished Beirut Stock Exchange. The transformation of downtown Beirut into a corporation meant that one could, in addition to buying real estate, purchase shares in the area through Solidere.¹² Downtown Beirut is now a corporate space in a double sense: as a built form, with global corporate brands occupying and dominating the space, and as a territory, organized under the corporate sovereignty of Solidere.

Solidere was framed as an “urban growth machine” that would act as an economic engine for the entire country.¹³ It facilitated in the territory of downtown Beirut the construction of a high-quality urban fabric with its own electricity and fiber-optic network and a tunnel that connects it straight to the airport highway. But at the start of the new millennium, a scholarship began to accumulate on how the Solidere-led reconstruction was contributing significantly to fiscal crisis, corruption, and social inequality.¹⁴ This work details how Solidere stood at the intersection of an intricate set of financial rents directed toward the Lebanese elite and created through compensation, treasury bills, high interest rates, tax avoidance, and real estate speculation. Solidere may have been an urban growth machine for a narrow segment of the population, but much of the country has experienced it as an urban parasite that sucks the lifeblood out of the Lebanese economy and social life from the city streets. Today, this exclusive, high-end urban core—with pristine but empty streets—stands in stark contrast to a collapsing and congested urban fabric in the rest of the country.

Solidere has been an acute source of tension in Lebanon from the moment it was formally announced. The legal framework through which it was established, Law 117/91, forced property owners in downtown Beirut to give up their land in exchange for stocks in the

¹¹ For a full account see: Sharp, “Urban Violence in War and Peace.”

¹² See, <https://www.solidere.com/>.

¹³ This is the influential thesis by Harvey Molotch that argues that coalitions of actors and organizations coalesce around the idea of the interest of local growth and compete with growth machines elsewhere for scarce mobile capital investment while gaining support of local publics for such urban growth, see: Scott Rodgers, “Urban Growth Machine,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, eds. Robert Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Elsevier, 2009), 40-55.

¹⁴ See for example: Richard Becherer, “A matter of life and debt: the untold costs of Rafiq Hariri’s New Beirut,” *The Journal of Architecture* 10, 1 (February 2005); Reinoud Leenders, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Najib Hourani, “*Capitalists in Conflict*,” (PhD diss., New York University, 2005); Tom Najem, *Lebanon’s Renaissance: The Political Economy of Reconstruction* (Garnet & Ithaca Press, 2000).

company.¹⁵ Numerous residents, scholars, and activists objected to the idea that a single urban development corporation should lead the reconstruction, pointing to the conflict of interest it produced between the public and private sectors. The principal sponsor of the ostensibly private company Solidere was the Saudi-Lebanese billionaire Rafik Hariri, who was simultaneously Lebanon's first post-war prime minister.

Hariri designed Solidere to take advantage of institutional set-ups that had been created in previous attempts at reconstruction in the course of the civil war years. Most notable among them was the formation of the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), which holds sweeping powers for planning, financing, implementing, and monitoring reconstruction processes and is effectively able to bypass parliament. A 2021 study by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies notes that the CDR has become a profitable source of rents for powerful and well-connected elites.¹⁶ The World Bank reported in a 2020 survey that most Lebanese respondents had "no trust at all" in the CDR.¹⁷ In my own conversations, international officials have sworn that not a penny of post-blast reconstruction funds will go through the institution due to concerns that they would be embezzled by Lebanese elites.

The example of Solidere shows that reconstruction has been foremost a site of political struggle to extract resources and further entrench societal division—what I have termed elsewhere, reconstruction as violence.¹⁸ But it is not only downtown Beirut that has followed this trend. In the July 2006 war, Israel targeted the Beirut neighborhood of Haret Hreik, a residential neighborhood that is also the effective headquarters of Hezbollah. Israeli bombing caused widespread destruction and displaced over 100,000 dwellers.¹⁹ Many remarked favorably upon the rapid Hezbollah-led reconstruction of the area under the agency *Wa'd* ("promise" in Arabic). But Mona Fawaz's extensive research dispels any ideas that this reconstruction placed use value ahead of financial and political value.

Fawaz argues that the Hezbollah reconstruction followed the dictates of the "neoliberal planning regime" and that this regime is necessary "for the party's consolidation of its territory in the city and for fixing the space of this neighborhood according to its own political calculations."²⁰ Despite, for instance, the fact that many problems the reconstruction area faced were of a communal nature (traffic and the absence of playgrounds and sidewalks),

¹⁵ For a full account of Law 117/91 and its controversy, see: Leenders, *Spoils of Truce*.

¹⁶ Lebanon Center for Policy Studies, "The Value of a 'Seat at the Table': How Elites Interfere in Lebanon's Public Infrastructure Procurement," (March 2021), https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/publications/1615217838-lcps_cdr_article_v4.pdf.

¹⁷ EU, UN and World Bank, "Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF)."

¹⁸ I have coined this term in the context of my work on the reconstruction debate in Syria but it is also applicable to Lebanon's experience of reconstruction. See, <https://architecture.mit.edu/history-theory-and-criticism/lecture/reconstruction-violence-case-aleppo>.

¹⁹ Mona Fawaz, "The Politics of Property in Planning: Hezbollah's Reconstruction of Haret Hreik (Beirut, Lebanon) as Case Study," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, 3 (May 2014).

²⁰ Fawaz, "The Politics of Property in Planning."

Wa'd focused on individual owners, and as a result, private residential units.²¹ Hezbollah maintained this focus, Fawaz argues, because the owners' presence was meant to secure the future of the neighborhood as the party's territorial base: "With their resettlement on-site, the neighborhood's large representational or symbolic significance is secured as memorialization of the party's victory."²²

In May 2007, the militant Islamist group Fatah al-Islam infiltrated the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr al-Bared in northern Lebanon. A furious battle ensued with the Lebanese army, resulting in the deaths of 40 Palestinian civilians, 168 Lebanese soldiers, and 22 militants, and the displacement of some 33,000 refugees.²³ The camp was left in complete ruin. Again, it was not the camp's residents that were prioritized in the reconstruction, but political, military, and economic considerations. The Lebanese government militarized the reconstruction process: The state's declarations that there would be a swift and participatory reconstruction process were contradicted by a lack of dialogue with the displaced Palestinian community, allegations of corruption, and heightened security.²⁴ Over a decade later, only half the camp's residents have had their houses rebuilt. Those that could not return to their homes in the camp remain doubly displaced and often live in sub-standard shelter.

Reconstruction as Political Organizing

Lebanon's current mobilization around reconstruction should be understood in relation to the recent revolts that have spread throughout the country. In October 2019, large-scale, non-sectarian protests erupted nationwide and unsettled the political system.²⁵ In the almost-utopian early weeks and months of the protests, as Mona Fawaz and Isabela Serhan explain, Lebanese citizens "recovered public space where people of all walks of life... [discussed] political transformation, activist organization, accountability for corrupt decision-makers, financial bankruptcy, [and] strategies of non-violent resistance."²⁶ Protesters also made political gains in this period. The government resigned and change in Lebanon suddenly seemed possible. These revolts have involved not only a presence on the streets, but also substantive institutional organizing.

²¹ Fawaz, "The Politics of Property in Planning," 925.

²² Fawaz, "The Politics of Property in Planning," 930.

²³ Ismael Sheikh Hassan and Sari Hanafi, "(In)Security and Reconstruction in Post-Conflict Nahr Al-Barid Refugee Camp," *Journal of Palestine Studies* XL no.1 (August 2010), 35.

²⁴ Hassan and Hanafi, "(In)Security and Reconstruction in Post-Conflict Nahr Al-Barid Refugee Camp," 38.

²⁵ I am currently part of a large-scale collaborative project on the Lebanon protests, for more information see: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/middle-east-centre/research/collaboration-programme/2020-21/deen-sharp>.

²⁶ Mona Fawaz and Isabela Serhan, "Urban Revolutions: Lebanon's October 2019 Uprising," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. <https://www.ijurr.org/spotlight-on/urban-revolts/urban-revolutions-lebanons-october-2019-uprising/>

Clouds soon formed over the protest movement, however. Lebanon wrestled with COVID-19 like the rest of the world, and an economic implosion compounded its troubles. In March 2020, as COVID-19 was starting to rapidly spread across the globe, the government failed to repay a \$1.2 billion bond. This was the country's first-ever sovereign default, and it precipitated a remarkable economic downfall.²⁷ It has meant, as Karim Makdisi described: "There is now real poverty, the kind never seen before in modern Lebanon."²⁸ This poverty worsened with the massive explosion at the port on August 4, 2020.

In the blast's aftermath, the World Bank, United Nations, and European Union undertook a Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment that estimated that Lebanon's public sector reconstruction and recovery needs for one year were \$2 billion.²⁹ The study reported extensive damage to the sectors of housing, culture, health, and transport, and to the critical site of the port where the blast occurred. As the report notes: "The Port of Beirut explosion has exacerbated the impact of Lebanon's pre-existing crises."³⁰ But it was also a product of those crises.

The explosion at the Beirut port was not a natural disaster; it was at least in part the outcome of a clientelist state apparatus formed at the birth of the Second Lebanese Republic.^{31, 32} Following the official end of the civil war, the port's management and administration was sliced up as part of the post-Ta'if Troika (which formalized a Christian-Maronite president, Sunni prime minister, and Shia speaker of parliament) and became dependent on incessant power struggles, "paralyzing routine decision-making and sound governance."³³ The cache of 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate had been left at the port for at least six years. Employees at the port repeatedly raised the alarm, but state officials focused on reassigning responsibility rather than disposing safely of highly-explosive

²⁷ An economic fallout that continues to reach new depths; the Lebanese Lira now trades at 15,000 to the dollar, a tenth of what it was worth in 2019. Poverty has risen from 28 percent in 2019 to 55 percent in 2020.

²⁸ Karim Makdisi, "Lebanon's October 2019 Uprising: From Solidarity to Division and Descent into the Known Unknown," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120:2 (April 2021), 445.

²⁹ EU, UN and World Bank, "Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF)." (December 2020), 15.

³⁰ EU, UN and World Bank, "Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF)," 26.

³¹ The Second Lebanese Republic is marked by the signing of the Ta'if Peace Accord that formally ended the Civil War in 1989 (although some of the most ferocious fighting of the fifteen year conflict continued until 1991) and Lebanon's first parliamentary elections in 20 years in October 1992. The elections resulted in Rafik Hariri being elected as Prime Minister in controversial circumstance and a context in which the Lebanese Lira lost 120 percent of its value vis-à-vis the US dollar. The new Republic was agreed in the context of a complex set of geopolitical agreements between the Americans, Saudi Arabia and Israel on one hand and Syria on the other; it facilitated the Syrian occupation of Lebanon until 2005.

³² Clientelism is the reciprocal exchange of good and services based on a personal link. In Lebanon due to the legacy of the civil war militias offered services to fighters and civilians residing in the territories they controlled. In the postwar period, militias transformed themselves into political parties and institutionalized parallel social service and political wings. This has meant in Lebanon that access to social welfare provision is based on personal connections to ethnic or sectarian organizations. See: Melani Cammett and Sukriti Issar, "Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon," *World Politics* 62, 3 (July 2010), pp.381-421.

³³ Reinoud Leenders, "Timebomb at the Port: How Institutional Failure, Political Squabbling and Greed Set the Stage for Blowing up Beirut," *Arab Reform Initiative* (September 2020), 7.

material located in the heart of Beirut. Reinoud Leenders is unwilling to draw “a straight line” from the port’s institutional faults and political squabbling to the blast, but he does note that the chronic failure to build a strong, responsible, and accountable port authority is compatible with all hypotheses on what exactly caused the blast.³⁴

Mona Fawaz and Mona Harb have detailed how hundreds of Lebanese—youth in particular—who were “armed only with shovels and brooms” flocked to affected districts after the blast, where public agencies like the Beirut governor’s office were noticeably absent, overwhelmed, or inexperienced.³⁵ Fawaz and Harb detail how non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists, and professional syndicates all moved rapidly to engage in a reconstruction process, but they also warn against Lebanon turning into a “Republic of NGOs.”³⁶ An estimated 500 NGOs are supporting the reconstruction with help from the enormous Lebanese diaspora and subsidies from donors.³⁷ Citing the infamous experience of Haiti, but also Iraq and Yemen, Harb and Fawaz argue that the discourse amongst NGOs and others of “*sidelining the state*” should be cause for alarm.³⁸ They highlight the necessity of a synergy between NGOs and public agencies while also lamenting the “rampant corruption and accumulated failures of state agencies.”³⁹

The Lebanese state has not produced its own plan for reconstruction or a needs assessment ten months after the blast, and this absence has very real consequences for Lebanese people. It prevents, for instance, reimbursement from international reinsurers, as it is undetermined (officially) what caused the Beirut port explosion. Reinsurers require state designations to know the basis on which they are issuing payments: an act of war, terrorism, or negligence on the part of the port and/or governmental authorities.⁴⁰ The inability of the government to control inflation and the exchange rate of the Lebanese lira is also making reconstruction more difficult. How do you price materials when the lira is oscillating so wildly? A windowpane that cost LL 300,000 in 2019 cost LL 3 million in 2021. Due to this inflation, contractors are avoiding any work that involves payment in lira.⁴¹

While the state has dragged its feet, Lebanon’s professional associations have taken some action. In October 2020, the Order of Engineers and Architects of Beirut released a declaration that envisaged a rehabilitation and revitalization program for areas impacted by

³⁴ Leenders, “Timebomb at the Port,” 14.

³⁵ Mona Harb and Mona Fawaz, “Is Lebanon Becoming Another “Republic of the NGOs”?”, *Arab Center Washington DC* (October 2020), <http://arabcenterdc.org/research-paper/is-lebanon-becoming-another-republic-of-the-ngos/>.

³⁶ Harb and Fawaz, “Is Lebanon Becoming Another “Republic of the NGOs”?”

³⁷ Urban Thinkers Campus, Beirut Post-Blast Reconstruction, https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Secretariat/2021/Webinars/UTC_Beirut_2021_Announcement2.pdf.

³⁸ Harb and Mona Fawaz, “Is Lebanon Becoming Another “Republic of the NGOs”?”

³⁹ Harb and Mona Fawaz, “Is Lebanon Becoming Another “Republic of the NGOs”?”

⁴⁰ Nabil Makari, “Deal or no deal: Insurance policies post-Beirut explosion,” *Executive Magazine* (April 6, 2021).

⁴¹ Rouba El Husseini, “Potholes, Graffiti, Broken Streetlights: Lebanon’s Crumbling Capital,” *Barron’s* (April 18, 2021).

the explosion.⁴² Lebanese academics, both abroad and within the country, have mobilized to document different reconstruction initiatives and to create forums for debate over what a just reconstruction should look like. The Beirut Urban Lab at the American University of Beirut, for instance, has tracked and mapped initiatives in response to the blast to ensure a “people-centered holistic recovery process.”⁴³ The political reconstruction of Lebanon is actively underway, if not yet achieved. In universities across the country, which have always been an important hub for national politics, new student movements and civic groups are sprouting up and winning elections.⁴⁴ Non-sectarian political parties and coalitions are forming, growing, or reviving, including the National Bloc and Beirut Madinati. These parties are actively building coalitions and mobilizing to take on the “ruling elite” in the May 2022 parliamentary elections.⁴⁵ Development researcher Lea Bou Khater has detailed how professionals—inspired by the Sudanese Professional Association, which played a notable role in the 2018 Sudanese uprisings—have responded to an anemic labor movement by forming the Lebanese Association of Professionals and “coordinat[ing] alternative labor movements.”⁴⁶ Initiatives like these, along with the replacement of shattered windows and broken doors, will be key to any durable and just reconstruction.

International Implications

The reconstruction that Lebanon faces, both in the wake of the blast and more broadly, has regional and international implications. Urban reconstructions are being imagined, planned, or are underway across the Middle East, including in Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Palestine (Gaza in particular), and Syria. Each has distinct characteristics, but all have experienced the use of reconstruction as a means through which to continue conflict, extraction, and displacement. There are many lessons to be learned, political solidarities and movements to be built, and resources to be shared across these contexts. Analysts often point to the toxic regional and international power dynamics that have wrought destruction in Lebanon and beyond. But possibilities also exist for regional and international linkages to be established to build solidarities and best practices. If the forces that pursue reconstruction as violence are international then so must efforts to direct reconstruction toward a more just and sustainable outcome.

⁴² Order of Engineers and Architects, Beirut. *Déclaration Urbaine de Beyrouth*.

⁴³ The Beirut Urban Lab, “Initiatives in Response to the Beirut Blast,” <https://www.beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/680/for-an-inclusive-and-just-urban-recovery-for-post-blast-beirut>.

⁴⁴ Najia Houssari, “Secular Lebanese student groups see political success amid national crisis,” *Arab News* (December 2020).

⁴⁵ AFP, “Lebanese Opposition Wants Joint Election Push to Oust Elite,” *Baron’s* (April 13, 2021).

⁴⁶ Lea Bou Khater, “Lebanon’s October 2019 Revolution: Inquiry into Recomposing Labor’s Power,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120:2 (April 2021), 468.

Yet rarely is an interregional or international approach taken to reconstruction. Those working in Iraq—activists, policy makers, and urban planners—do not share experiences and lessons learned with those in Yemen or Lebanon. Even international agencies like the United Nations that work simultaneously on different rebuilding efforts rarely engage in cross-border dialogues. The need for concerned parties to analyze political processes within rebuilding practices and to share experiences and strategies across contexts has never been more urgent. This can take the form of simply establishing shared forums for discussion and analysis of these topics on a regional basis that are currently underutilized, like the online platform Arab Urbanism.⁴⁷

Conclusion

There is much work to be done by scholars, activists, and policy makers to help chart a path forward in regard to what a just reconstruction process—and spatial justice more broadly—looks like in Lebanon, the region, and beyond. To date, it is all too clear that the history of reconstruction in Lebanon is not one of social repair, or “building back better,” but of the further extension of violence, exclusion, corruption, and displacement. The country has been trapped in a cruel reconstruction cycle and breaking free requires political transformation. For Lebanon to reconstruct, there needs to be what Achille Mbembe has termed an “active will to community,” the goal of which is to realize a shared project for the country.⁴⁸ This does exist: Although the protest movement has experienced many fissures and bitter contestations, it has also revealed a will among a significant segment of the population to reconstruct Lebanon on more just and hopeful terms. There is an active will in Lebanon among its inhabitants to wrestle back from militias and sectarian political parties basic urban services, infrastructure, and public space to ensure they are not distributed and accessed on the notion of, for instance, sectarian belonging or class based exclusionary logics. Activists have made detailed proposals outlining how Beirut could be remade into a more “livable city” to create a more equitable urban future.⁴⁹

I am not Panglossian—excessively optimistic—about the situation. But I am hopeful that Lebanon will survive this period and, through agitation and organizing, build new forms of collective belonging in the country. As Rebecca Solnit states, “The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as the grave.”⁵⁰ The protest movement has shown that there is the ability and active will in Lebanon to imagine and work toward a more just future. Even in these times of despair, there are spaces of hope.

⁴⁷ See Arab Urbanism, <https://www.araburbanism.com/>.

⁴⁸ Achille Mbembe, *Essays on Decolonization: Out of the Dark Night* (New York, Columbia University Press: 2021).

⁴⁹ Deen Sharp, “Beirut Madinati: Another Future Is Possible” *Middle East Institute* (September 27, 2016).

⁵⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, (Nation Books, 2004).

Ma'an's Material Debris - the Railroad Graveyard

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“To ruin,” according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, “is to inflict or bring great and irretrievable disaster upon, to destroy agency, to reduce to a state of poverty, to demoralise completely.” Attention here is on *to ruin* as an active process and a vibrantly violent verb. This is not a turn to ruins as memorialised monumental leftovers or relics... but rather to what people are left with: to what remains blocking livelihoods and health, to the aftershocks of imperial assault, to the social afterlife of structures, sensibilities and things.⁵²

“We are a city forgotten... Ma'an is poor, dirty, depressed, the place everyone in Jordan avoids... “We founded this country... Now all we want is a future, not just a past.”⁵³

This short piece wrestles with what we learn as we trace the debris of the Hijazi railway in Jordan, along unused, decaying tracks to the town that became its final destination point after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire – Ma'an; and slowly, incrementally, the final resting place for both the Hijaz and Jordan's national rail infrastructure. I came to Ma'an to better understand the meaning and impact of 'disconnection', amidst contemporary geo-economic prerogatives that claim global connection is key to a country's survival.⁵⁴ Despite its colloquial fame as a key node in Ottoman transit routes, and later, as the Hashemite Kingdom's first seat of government, today's Ma'an sits at the lowest ends of the country's statistical spectrum.⁵⁵ I am therefore also working with the material remains of the railway, to

⁵¹ This piece would not have been possible without support and interventions by wonderful friends, colleagues and interlocutors. Thanks especially to my partners at the Arab Center for Alternative Planning (especially Dr. Hanna Swaid) for their ongoing support and contributions towards this research; Dr. Aya Abutayeh, who shared Ma'an with me; Dr. Maia Holtermann-Entwistle for helping me plan everything (and for being such an amazing collaborator on this project); Dr. José Martinez, for trusting me with his unpublished work; Dr. Lewis Turner for reading a draft and assuring me it was ok; and to Aya Nassar, who has changed how I write and think with infrastructure. The research that under-writes this work was enabled through the financial support of the ESRC's New Investigator Grant Scheme ("From Walls to Corridors: The Global Logistics of Israel's HaEmek Railway", ES/S01439X/1).

⁵² Ann Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 9

⁵³ Interlocutors from Ma'an, Jordan, cited in José Ciro Martinez, "Ambivalent States: Paradoxes of Subjection in the Jordanian South", *Environment and Planning D: Space and Society*, No 0 (0, 2022: online first), p. 2-3.

⁵⁴ Jean-Francois Arvis, Lauri Ojala, Christina Wiederer, Ben Shepherd, Anasuya Raj, Karlygash Dairabayeva, Tuomas Kiiski, "Connecting to Compete 2018: Trade Logistics in the Global Economy", *The World Bank*, 2018; see also Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in the Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁵⁵ For example, see: Department of Statistics, The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. "Jordan Population and Family Health Survey, 2017-2018" (Rockville: *DHS Program*, ICF, March, 2019). See also: Malika Bouziane, "The State from Below: Local Governance Practices in Jordan", *Journal of Economic and Social Research*, no 12 (1, 2010), 31-61.

explore how the fabric of a “forgotten city” is entangled in its relationship to the material ruins and active ruination of historical flows of people, goods and capital; and to the new infrastructure being laid to channel these flows elsewhere.



Figure 1: A Railway Ruin(ed), Map of Jordan's (now defunct) national railway⁵⁶

Debris

200 km south of Amman, 100 km east of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone's shiny new shipping terminals and logistics villages, and still 130 km from the border with Saudi Arabia, Ma'an sits within Jordan's peripheral edges. Given the lack of direct transit from Amman, it *feels* abandoned; economic, infrastructural and tourist-focused investment has clearly been shuttled elsewhere. Sitting on a bench at the local minibus station, sipping black coffee outside the one shop still open after Covid-19's devastation of local businesses, I looked for material traces of earlier moments, when Ma'an bustled with life.

⁵⁶ Maps Jordan, “Jordan Railway Map”: <https://maps-jordan.com/jordan-railway-map>, accessed 12 Nov 2022.

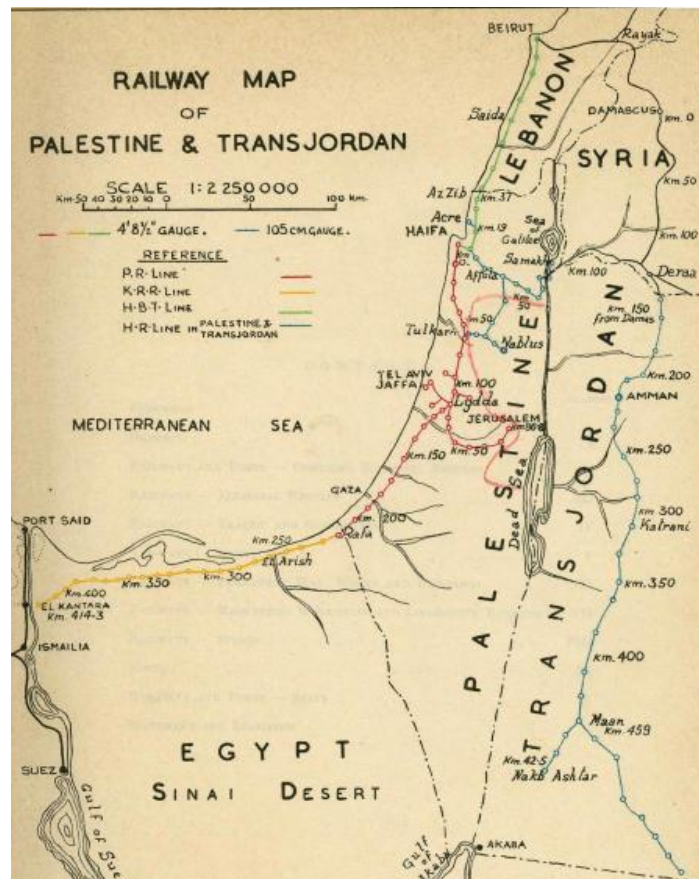


Figure 2: Haunting Circulations, Palestine Railways, 1946⁵⁷

In previous centuries, the town was a hub of religious transit and the fortunes that move with it. An endless circulation of people and goods traversed Ma'an's (now shuttered) market stalls, on their way to and from the Hajj. In 1904, the newly-built rail terminal cemented Ma'an's relevance to the Ottoman-German modernisation – and securitisation – project, to connect the Mediterranean to the Arabian Peninsula via steel-gage and steam locomotion (competing with French-laid tracks moving in parallel across Lebanon and Syria). Twenty years later, King Abdullah turned the station into his administrative and military command centre. By 1925 it was the founding site of Hashemite rule, the King's southern palace. Now the building is boarded up, empty, even the furniture has found its way northwards to Amman, on moving trucks (apparently like everything else), sharing its fate with the now-

⁵⁷ Palestine Railways General Manager Report, "Schematic Railway Map of Palestine and Transjordan", 1946: <https://www.rmweb.co.uk/topic/70172-north-africamiddle-east/page/2/>, accessed 12 Nov 2022.

defunct railway. One day it will be a museum, an ode to Jordan's origin stories,⁵⁸ surrounded by condemned buildings, dilapidated warehouses and broken tracks, that extend into Ma'an's potholed, forlorn streets.

In *Black Marxism*, as Cedric Robinson maps out the evolution of racial capitalism in his initial chapters, there is a moment where he pauses to take note of the material markers of imperial decay.⁵⁹ He points to the corpses of great cities, deprived of their connections to long-distance trade, as circulation was reoriented towards new (silk) roads and market routes, alongside the productive, economic and cultural vitality that flowed with them. Citing Henri Pirenne's *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, Robinson paints a picture of what happens to those left behind in the restructuring of economic circuits:

*(P)orts and cities were deserted. The link with the Orient was severed and there was no communication with Saracen coasts. There was nothing but death... The Mediterranean territories, formerly the most active portions of the Empire, which supported the life of the whole, were now the poorest, the most desolate, the most constantly menaced.*⁶⁰

Interestingly, less poetic but no less stark versions of this can be read in World Bank, IMF and OECD reports on transport infrastructure and economic resiliency.⁶¹ The development of a country's capacity for smooth, uninterrupted connections to global supply and trade routes – to the coordinated matrix of logistics networks that shape and channel global trade – is inherently tied to their survival. Thus, competition for inclusion in global capitalist circuits is cut-throat; costs are high, rewards uncertain. With this in mind, Jordan has sold itself to donors, investors and business interlocutors as strategically located at the crossroads of '1 billion customers.'⁶² Branding itself the perfect corridor between newly inaugurated partners on the Mediterranean and along the Persian Gulf, requires its own internal reorientations. Ma'an, sitting so far off – and, as I was told, so unprofitable to – the beaten path of these new circuits, will almost certainly be left out.⁶³

⁵⁸ The Hashemite Royal Court, "The Founding King's Palace, Ma'an": <https://rhc.jo/en/royal-court/palace-founding-king-maan>, accessed 24 October, 2022.

⁵⁹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 11-13

⁶⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 12

⁶¹ Arvis et al, "Connecting to Compete"; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Fostering investment in infrastructure: OECD investment policy reviews", OECD, 2015.

⁶² Ministry of Investment (MOIN), Jordanian Government: <https://www.moin.gov.jo/en/home-new/>. Accessed: 26 Oct, 2022)

⁶³ Field Research for this paper included interviews with a range of interlocutors, across Jordan's supply chain and logistics infrastructures, 30 May – 5 Jun, 2022. This reference is supported in particular, by interviews with Aqaba Port interlocutors, 2-4 Jun, 2022.

In Ma'an, the resulting neglect is palpable. It is in the stories of local shop-workers, restaurant staff, public servants, teachers and government officials.⁶⁴ It sifts through the promises of still-unrealised strategic plans, in which economic investment is always forthcoming. And it lives and breathes in the once and future train, whose debris sits at the edges of town, past heritage buildings, past the market, past government offices, out of circulation, the promises of reconnection always out of reach.

Graveyard

Ann Stoler in *Imperial Debris* asks us to attune ourselves to that which is materially tangible in our encounters with imperial circuits.⁶⁵ As we walk, drive, sail, move through – and get stuck in – the spaces traversed and destroyed by imperial formations, our present (and past) unravel in the physical objects they leave behind. Michel Trouillot offers further insights, telling us that these material traces are productive histories, imbued with power and silence.⁶⁶ And in interrogating the stories of concrete things – the journeys they took, the people that made them, the sites they linked, the communities they displaced – we find much more than ghostly remnants.⁶⁷ We get a sense of the making, unmaking and remaking of imperial connections and competition, their edges and their limits, channels and blockages, flows and frictions. And what is lost, ruined and born-again in their wake⁶⁸.

These imperial leftovers are multiple and flexible in form: ruins that we proudly venerate and remember, but also objects left in ruin, still on their way to being part of – or erased from – contemporary memory. And then there are those being pushed to the periphery, in the process of being ruined, to make room, to be repurposed towards the new. Sometimes you find them in the same place, laid out in topological layers.⁶⁹ Delving beneath the surface feels like unearthing a chasm of seemingly bottomless silences, ready to tell us how power, capital and violence accumulate, cannibalise and move on. Ruins – like peripheries – are made. Ruination is a verb, pregnant with the violence of neglect.

⁶⁴ Aqaba Port interviews; Ma'an interlocutor interviews, 1 June, 2022; Bouziane, "The State from Below"; Martinez, "Ambivalent States".

⁶⁵ Stoler, *Imperial Debris*.

⁶⁶ Michel Trouillot, *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁶⁷ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁶⁸ Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

⁶⁹ Shehab, Ismail. The Historical Junkyards of Cairo. Trafo: Blog for Transregional Research, 2021: <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/26297>. Accessed: 26,

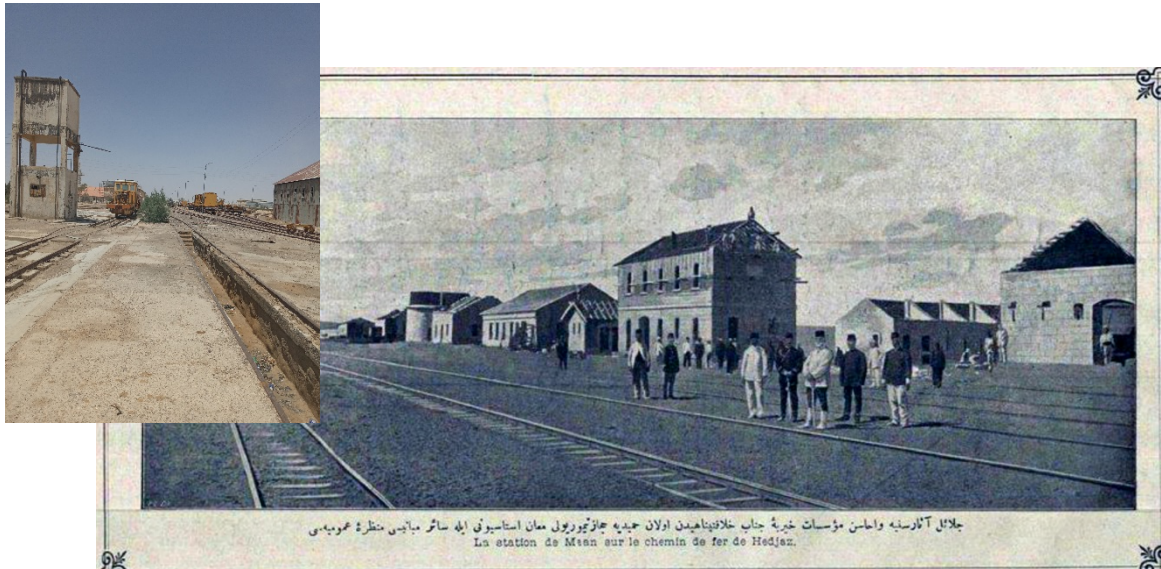


Figure 3 (left): Ma'an station, a railroad graveyard;⁷⁰ and Figure 4 (right): Ma'an station, Hijaz Railway View⁷¹

Hot desert sun and tumbleweeds wait for me as I walk out the rear entrance of Jordan's Aqaba district railway operations office in Ma'an. With each passing metre, a complex layering of ruination, nostalgia and neglect reveal themselves. As the the building recedes, we are quickly covered in the dust of empty, unpaved roads; sparse and insistent plant life mark where one begins and the other ends. Rows of rusted steel gage point to where the train used to run, an abject white, stone mansion in the distance: the 1904 terminal building, turned King's 'Founding Palace'. We encounter no one as we reach a cul-de-sac, where the workshops must have been. I am greeted by a mix of still majestic Ottoman-built stone barns and the more modern fixtures of dilapidated Jordanian-railway buildings. These host broken windows, rotten wooden frames and rusty, steel shutters, and still house leftover train cars and engines, now covered in dirt and spider webs. The iron and wood 'slippers' connecting the tracks, have one missing every fourth or fifth step. And then I'm hit with the haunting sight of rows and rows of the faded white carcasses of railway cars, with the words 'Hijaz' or 'Jordanian Railways' printed on the side. With the sun beating down on us, they look like bleached bones, the flesh torn away by carrion birds. Set against the crumbling white and grey stone of the Ottoman buildings, their slow demise into rubble, into imperial debris, into ruins, seem to have already been determined.

⁷⁰ Image by author, Ma'an, Jordan, 1 Jun, 2022.

⁷¹ Historical Railway Images, "Ma'an Station on the route of the Hijaz":

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/124446949@N06/14336966696>, accessed 12 Nov, 2022

These material traces tell multiple stories. First about the railway's slow journey into decay: here was a graveyard for the interlocutors of first Ottoman and then British imperial modes of connection. New regional frictions coincided with the rise of American hegemony and the new and exciting prospect of highways, cars and trucks were lauded as a more flexible and much cheaper mode of cross-border and inter-city transport. By the 1970s, the entire rail network was in disrepair and in need of expensive overhauls. The only routes still running into the 21st century was the Damascus-Irbid-Amman route (officially closed in 2011) and the Aqaba Railway Corporation's add-on freight service between Ma'an, Aqaba and the region's phosphate mines (which officially closed in 2018). Second, about Ma'an, itself: the graveyard of a city leftover, a site to be/being ruined.

In both Laleh Khalili's *Sinews of War and Trade* and Charmaine Chua's *Containing the Ship of State*, we learn of what happens to those deemed surplus to the unfettered movement of global supply networks, as all space and all people are forced to flow in sync with global capital.⁷² We hear echoes of Pirenne, of Robinson, of the World Bank here, as disconnection constitutes ruin. With regional railway integration coming back into fashion across the continent –in what is being termed 'railway diplomacy' in *MEED's* 2022 Business Review⁷³ – Jordan's investment and transport strategy surveys all point to a resurgence of north-south and east-west rail connectivity.⁷⁴ But Amman is looking for private partners.⁷⁵ And private partners are uninterested in Ma'an's needs and interests. Instead, they would inevitably read Ma'an through the lens of a balance sheet, perhaps taking note of the years of discord between Ma'an's residents and the state: the subsistence protests that erupted in 1989 and again in 1996; the 1998 riots triggered by the new US-led sanctions against Iraq; the 2002 clashes between state military forces and local Islamic activists (triggering a military siege and bombardment of the city). A pattern emerged and repeated itself, in 2010, 2014, 2015 and 2019. From the vantage of the Jordanian state, Ma'an became 'unruly', 'stubborn' and 'defiant', a hostile and insecure place to travel, let alone do business.⁷⁶ These would become the grounds to close off circulation, to let ruin set in. According to recent poverty assessments, 28% of all households suffer at the edge of the poverty line, and unemployment is among the highest in the country, hovering at 20%.⁷⁷

The balance sheet continues, and Ma'an, as the newly made periphery, 'socioeconomically deprived and politically marginalised' just doesn't stand up against the more viable routes

⁷² Laleh Khalili. *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso Books, 2020). Charmaine Chua, *Containing the Ship of State: Managing mobility in an age of logistics*. PhD Thesis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2018).

⁷³ Colin Foreman, "Railway Diplomacy", *MEED: Middle East Business Intelligence*, No 7 (June, 2022).

⁷⁴ MOIN website, 26 Oct, 2022; Strategie cs Think Tank, Rail Network Strategy: Jordanian Hopes and Search for Regional Integration, 2021.

⁷⁵ Interviews with Aqaba Railway Corporation (ARC) interlocutors, 1 Jun, 2022; MOIN website, 26 Oct, 2022; interview with MOIN interlocutor, 5 Jun, 2022.

⁷⁶ Martinez, "Ambivalent States", p. 3

⁷⁷ *ibid*

currently being heralded for harnessing global transit and trade – where the greatest bang for one's buck can be found.⁷⁸ Development of the UAE and Saudi Arabia's latest billion-dollar transport integration projects have already been announced,⁷⁹ alongside the failed promise of Syrian and Iraqi connections through Jordan. And then there's the HaEmek line, inching its way from a new offshore and automated Chinese container port in Haifa, offering the shortest land bridge from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, through Jordan. Multiple trade magazines and think tanks are already tentatively proclaiming this route a done deal.⁸⁰ Materially, the shift is already happening, as indicated by the opening of the al-Madouna customs gateway and logistics hub in Eastern Amman in June, 2022 (intimating that this ultimately replaces the Saudi-Jordanian Investment Fund's previous commitment to build a land-port in Ma'an).⁸¹ And according to conversations I had with interlocutors in Aqaba, Amman and Ma'an in June, 2022, it feels as if Jordan will do anything to take part in these flows, to get the train moving again, to get the country moving again.⁸²

Hauntings

In Yara Hawari's "Palestine *sine tempore*?" we find an exploration of nostalgia as a mode of resilience, resistance and empowerment, an active struggle over the present and what might be possible in the future.⁸³ In Stoler, it is also an active verb, a mode of mourning, 'contingent and concomitant' with what has been destroyed.⁸⁴ Each resonates with the idea of nostalgia as a process of constantly being haunted – both by what has been lost and what is missing from the present moment. Ma'an's railroad graveyard is filled with this longing –

⁷⁸ Bouziane, "The State from Below", p. 51; also, thank you to Katy Fox-Hodess for this turn of phrase, in our interview for *Surviving Society Presents Material Crimes – Episode 4: The Train to Nowhere* (forthcoming, 20 Dec, 2022)

⁷⁹ Reuters, "Saudi Arabia to build 8,000 km of railway, enact new investment law", *Reuters*, 12 Jan, 2022: [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-build-14000-km-railway-enact-new-investment-law-2022-01-12/#:~:text=RIYADH%2C%20Jan%2012%20\(Reuters\),al%2DFalih%20said%20on%20Wednesday](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-build-14000-km-railway-enact-new-investment-law-2022-01-12/#:~:text=RIYADH%2C%20Jan%2012%20(Reuters),al%2DFalih%20said%20on%20Wednesday); Staff Writer, "UAE, Oman to build \$3bn railway linking Abu Dhabi, Muscat with 200kph passenger trains in landmark deal", *Arabian Business*, 28 Sep, 2022: <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/transport/travel-between-uae-and-oman-via-high-speed-train-in-new-landmark-deal>

⁸⁰ Foreman (MEED), "Railway Diplomacy"; Strategics, "Rail Network Strategy"

⁸¹ In 2019, the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Association (ASEZA) and the Saudi-Jordanian Investment Fund (SIJF) signed a Memorandum of Understanding, committed to building a land-port and customs gateway in Ma'an. The project has since dissipated, after various feasibility surveys by ASEZA and others (ASEZA interlocutor interviews, 2-4 Jun, 2022). Recent news intimates that the planned railway network will instead link Aqaba Port with the above-mentioned Al-Madouna customs gateway. For more details on the Ma'an land-port, see: *Jordanian Times* (JT), "Saudi-Jordanian fund, ASEZA sign MoU to build railway connecting Aqaba, Maan", *JT*, 10 Feb, 2019: <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/saudi-jordanian-fund-aseza-sign-mou-build-railway-connecting-aqaba-maan>. For more on the current railway plans, see: *Time News*, "Progress in Jordan's National Railway Project", *TimeNews*, 31 May 2022: <https://time.news/progress-in-jordans-national-railway-project/>

⁸² *Jordanian field research*, interviews with logistics interlocutors, 30 May – 5 June, 2022.

⁸³ Yara Hawari, "Palestine *sine tempore*?", *Rethinking History*, No 22 (2, 2018), p.165-183

⁸⁴ Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, p.16

as are the empty markets, the quiet, dusty streets, the old men sipping coffee with me outside the bus station. More material traces. Everyone I met spoke of a time when the city was a hub – for Ottoman, British or, in more recent years, Iraqi trade, transit and traffic. In these conversations, these times of surplus all melted into one another, ghosts of another Ma'an, another Jordan. And then became projections, of what might yet happen, if only the railway, the connection, the government jobs, the king, came back.



Figure 3: Bleached Bodies, Ma'an Station⁸⁵

As I reckon with what we learn as Ma'an is made, unmade and re-made in relation to global transit flows, I also engage these cravings, these hauntings, the ghost stories of a town now in the process of ruination. In the material debris of broken engines and buildings, we sense the affective remnants of a town left out; a place forgotten and discarded, as pointedly expressed by Jose Martinez's interlocutors, cited above. In some ways, this ruin is happening actively, intentionally. But in many ways, it is simply a vestige of being surplus and unnecessary to contemporary imperial and capitalist formations. I'd like to end this on a more positive note, but I am still reeling from the ghostly graves of the railway.

⁸⁵ Image by author, Ma'an Station, 1 June, 2022

The State of Mobility Justice in Egypt, 1980—Present

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The struggle for equal access to mobility in Egyptian cities is in an acute state. The Egyptian state is currently building more than 5,000km of new roads, highways, and flyovers under the aegis of the National Roads Project (NRP).⁸⁶ Announced in 2014, the project was allocated an initial budget of EGP 36 billion in state funds and investments.⁸⁷ The flurry of mobility infrastructure construction in contemporary Egypt—which includes the New Suez Canal Zone (NSCZ) in 2015—brought together different factions of the Egyptian state, local contractors, and regional and global capital. Locally, it brought the state in direct confrontation with aggrieved citizens whose property is demolished, expropriated, or its market value severely depreciated due to those new infrastructures.⁸⁸ In Cairo, an onslaught of road and highway construction through residential neighborhoods ushered into the mainstream a debate about the right to urban mobility.⁸⁹ Those contemporary infrastructure projects and their resulting tensions urge us to reflect on the politics of mobility, infrastructure, and the state in Cairo and Egypt today.

This report provides an analytical overview of the relationship between mobility and the state in Egypt through the lens of urban infrastructure. I ask: how does the Egyptian state govern through urban mobility infrastructure? To explore this question, I draw on the case of the Greater Cairo Ring Road, the largest urban transport infrastructure in Cairo, from its planning and construction (1980s-2000s) to its current expansion project (2014-present). The Ring Road is a 106-km road that connects east and west Cairo and the three governorates that make up the Greater Cairo Region: Cairo, Giza, and Qalyubiyya. Its construction radically re-shaped Cairo's urban and political geography. I contend that the Ring Road's contentious history and politics are illustrative of the relationship between urban mobility infrastructure and changing forms of urban governance and control—essentially between capital and coercion—in Egypt since the onset of economic liberalization in the

⁸⁶ This number has varied since 2014. In June 2022, the Egyptian newspaper, *Masrawy*, reported the completion of 7,000km of new roads. I decided to stick to the estimated 5,000km, which was reported in Mohamed Hegazy, "Egypt Transport Policies 2014-2021," *Arab Reform Initiative* (2022): 7.

⁸⁷ National Investment Bank, "The National Road Project," <http://www.nib.gov.eg/ENGLISH/ACHIEVEMENT-E/transportation-&-roads1-e.html> A total of 2,100km are funded publicly through the National Investment Bank (NIB). The Ministry of Transport's General Authority for Roads, Bridges, and Land Transport (GARBLT) is constructing 1,300km at a cost of EGP 17 billion, while the Ministry of Housing's Central Agency for Reconstruction is constructing another 800km. The Egyptian military is constructing and funding 1,200km.

⁸⁸ See Nadeen Ibrahim and Aidan Lewis, "Egypt's Road Building Drive Eases Jams but Leaves Some Unhappy," *Reuters*, May 14, 2021: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/egypts-road-building-drive-eases-jams-leaves-some-unhappy-2021-05-14/>

⁸⁹ Tadamun. "Urban Mobility: More than Just Building Roads." *Tadamun*, July 25, 2016, <http://www.tadamun.co/urban-mobility-just-building-roads/?lang=en#.Y2VY4OzMJOs>.

1970s and 80s. For example, the Ring Road was initially planned as an infrastructure of spatial control and containment of potential social unrest and protest in Cairo in the late 1970s. Building on this, I situate the Ring Road and its uneven geographies of urban mobility in a political and theoretical discussion about unequal mobility and infrastructure.



This report is part of a broader project that studies the political economy of urban mobility justice in the Global South. It builds on scholarly debates in: **(1)** global and urban political economy, **(2)** critical infrastructure studies, and **(3)** mobility studies. Drawing on Cairo as an empirical case, the project theoretically analyzes why and how mobility is unequal on a global and urban scale. Mobility is a rich analytical category that addresses the movement of people, capital, commodities, ideas, and violence in an increasingly connected and globalized world. In my analysis, I use mobility to refer to “the material circulation of people [and] goods.”⁹⁰ I make two interventions. First, I build on Mimi Sheller’s definition of mobility justice as “an overarching concept for thinking about how power and inequality inform the governance and control of movement, shaping the patterns of unequal mobility and immobility in the circulation of people, resources, and information.”⁹¹ While mobility justice is not a concept that features on a state or local level, I argue that it is useful in conceptually

⁹⁰ Andrew Denning, “Life is Movement, Movement is Life! Mobility Politics and the Circulatory State in Nazi Germany,” *American Historical Review* 123, no. 5 (2018): 1480.

⁹¹ Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2018), 27.

framing a political analysis of mobility, infrastructure, and the state in Cairo. For example, the press articles, economic reports, and interviews I build my analysis on do not invoke the concept, yet their concern with questions of unequal mobility, dispossession, and inclusion/exclusion directly correspond to a mobility justice framework and research agenda. Doing so, I bring the empirical case of Cairo to debates in mobility justice and bring those debates to Cairo. Second, this report focuses on the role of the state in creating and upholding spaces and regimes of unequal mobility. Often overlooked, I argue that bringing the state to bear on questions and issues of mobility justice allows us to study unequal mobility as a system and order that intersects with existing political systems and social orders, including but not limited to the state.⁹² Drawing on the tools of political economy, I trace the dynamics of capital and coercion that underly Cairo's unequal mobility regime.⁹³ In Cairo, the state overwhelmingly sets the conditions of possibility for the mobility of some and not others. As a result, analyzing the *state* of mobility justice in Cairo and other Egyptian cities cannot ignore the *state*.

Constructing the Cairo Ring Road: Mobilizing Capital and Coercion, 1983-Present

The Egyptian daily newspaper *al-Ahram* first reported on February 25, 1983, of the construction "of a 72-km Ring Road around Cairo, with a cost of 240 million Egyptian pounds."⁹⁴ Having been in use since the early 2000s, the Road was officially inaugurated on August 30, 2009. "After 27 years," the privately-owned daily newspaper *al-Misry al-Youm* reported, the "President's [Mubarak] inauguration of the Marioutiyya corridor marks the completion of the Ring Road."⁹⁵ The Ring Road's master plan was a joint project between the Egyptian General Organization of Physical Planning (GOPP) and the Regional Institute for Urban Planning and Economic Development of Île de France (IAU-IdF). Since the beginning, the Road has been an urban development project. According to the 2012 report of the Misr National Transport Study (MINTS), the Greater Cairo Ring Road is one among many transport projects that are "considered essential for new urban development."⁹⁶ However, the Ring Road is a unique urban infrastructure. It is considered the most central node in all of Egypt's road network and is estimated to serve around a quarter million passengers/users *per day* in its northern section alone.⁹⁷ According to Egyptian law, the

⁹² See Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁹³ Tobias Haas, "The Political Economy of Mobility Justice: Experiences from Germany," *Mobilities* (2021): 12.

⁹⁴ *Al-Ahram*, "Decisions by the Ministerial Committee for Production: A Ring Road Around Cairo," *al-Ahram*, February 25, 1983.

⁹⁵ *Al-Misry al-Youm*, "Iktimāl al-dā'irī ba'd 27 'āman min inshā'uh bi iftitāh al-ra'īs li mihwar al-mariutiyya," *al-Misry al-Youm*, August 30, 2009: <https://www.almaznyalyoum.com/news/details/64051> (last accessed August 20, 2022).

⁹⁶ Japan International Cooperation Authority (JICA), "Misr National Transport Study (MINTS) – Report 2012," 56.

⁹⁷ Mahmoud al-Shaykh, "Misr bitibnī: Mashru' al-tarīq al-dā'irī hawl al-qāhira al-kubra," minute 3:08-3:35: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUOsnnGika>

Road has a special legal status and is ordained by presidential decree as “an infrastructure of special nature” (Decrees 379/1998 and 115/2006). Currently, the Ring Road has a special administration within the Ministry of Interior.⁹⁸ It is thus directly and visibly embedded within the Egyptian state’s strategic arrangement of its territory and within its disciplinary institutions. This sets it apart from other urban infrastructures of mobility in Egypt today.

The Ring Road was planned as a state project. Government technocrats, state planners, and military men have been directly involved in its planning and construction, both past and present. For example, the Road is widely considered Dr. Hasaballah El-Kafrawi’s “brainchild.”⁹⁹ Dr. Kafrawi was the former Minister of Reconstruction, Housing, and Land Reclamation from 1977 to 1993 and a long-standing technocrat of the Egyptian state. A civil engineer by training, he worked on the High Aswan Dam and served as governor of Damietta before assuming the ministry.¹⁰⁰ His political career extended over three post-independence presidents and was known for overseeing the construction of the new industrial and desert cities closely associated with former president Anwar Sadat’s reign. In his obituary in August 2021, *Ahram Online*, the English-language portal of the state-owned *al-Ahram*, celebrated his legacy as the “father of cities.”¹⁰¹ The new desert cities whose early years of planning and construction he oversaw, became a controversial paradigm of urban development in Cairo ever since.¹⁰² In February 2021, I interviewed Dr. Kafrawi, who shared more about the politics and history of urban and coastal development in Egypt than he did about the Ring Road, leading me to question the Road’s significance in the broader trajectory of urban development in Cairo. When I asked him about the Road’s funding, he explained that its construction was fully financed by the Egyptian state and assigned to the prominent Arab Contractors.¹⁰³ “It was 100% state-funded [and owned],” he explained. Indeed, according to Decrees 379/1998 and 115/2006, the Ring Road is directly under the purview of the General Authority for Roads, Bridges, and Land Transport (GARBLT). The Egyptian Public Treasury has full financial responsibility for its construction and

⁹⁸ Al-Wazir, “Interview with Sada al-Balad,” minute 5:55 to 5:59.

⁹⁹ I vaguely remember that the expression “Dr. Kafrawi’s brainchild” was used in a conversation I had in a conference in December 2020. As the details of the conversation and my interlocutor escape me, I want to acknowledge that it the expression is not mine.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Dr. Hasaballah al-Kafrawi, February 15, 2021, Cairo, Egypt.

¹⁰¹ Gamal Essam El-Din, “Father of Cities: Hasballah al-Kafrawi (1930-2021),” *Ahram Online*, August 14, 2021: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/418852/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt/Father-of-cities-Hassaballah-AlKafrawi-.aspx>

¹⁰² Dona J. Stewart, “Cities in the Desert: The Egyptian New Town Program,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, no. 3 (1996): 459-480; David Sims, *Egypt’s Desert Dreams: Development or Disaster?* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2018).

¹⁰³ See Maisa al-Salakawi, “Aham mahāwir al-ra’īsiyya ‘ala al-tarīq al-dā’irī li al-qāhira al-kubra... min tanfīz al-muqāwālūn al-‘arab,” *al-Ahram*, September 29, 1999. The Arab Contractors and the company’s founder, Osman Ahmed Osman, have played a consistently important role in shaping urban development and real estate in Egypt since the onset of economic liberalization in the 1970s. See R. W. Baker, *Sadat and After: Struggle for Egypt’s Political Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

maintenance. This is in line with the Egyptian state's assumption of "exclusive responsibility for planning and managing the built environment" after 1952.¹⁰⁴

The Ring Road's early years were mired in both local and international controversy. Locally, it dispossessed many of property and land and caused widespread environmental ruin in Greater Cairo. It was planned to spatially contain newly dispossessed laborers from central Cairo, whose planned resettlement in the desert never fully materialized.¹⁰⁵ In 1998, as an additional 230 million Egyptian pounds were invested in the Road,¹⁰⁶ it threatened a staggering 500 families with eviction.¹⁰⁷ That same year, the Ring Road made international headlines. A portion of the Road that was proposed to traverse the Giza Pyramids riled up both local and international opposition. Local lobbying efforts led the UNESCO to weigh in on the matter, successfully leading then-President Mubarak to stop the Ring Road from traversing the ancient site.¹⁰⁸ Today, as it connects Greater Cairo, the Road also disconnects various neighborhoods.¹⁰⁹ For example, residents of the Nile Island of al-Warraq, the meeting point of Greater Cairo's three governorates through the Ring Road, do not have physical access onto it.¹¹⁰ The agricultural island is site for one of the longest-standing land disputes with the state in Cairo. While the issue of al-Warraq is not reducible to the Ring Road, we witness this struggle over land and mobility unfold again around the Ring Road in its most recent expansion project.

Today, the Ring Road is at the center of new road building projects in Egypt and has as a result received large shares of public investments. The National Bank of Egypt and Banque Misr, two state banks, are supplying GARBLT with EGP 1.8 billion (USD 77.7 million today)

¹⁰⁴ W.J. Dorman, "Encroachments: Land, Power, and Predation," in *Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Egypt*, edited by Robert Springborg, Amr Adly, Anthony Gorman, Tamir Moustafa, Aisha Saad, Naomi Sakr, and Sarah Smierciak (London: Routledge, 2021), 247.

¹⁰⁵ In a televised interview in August 2018, Hussein Sabbour, one of Egypt's most prominent real estate developers, alleged that there were plans to relocate around two million poor and working-class residents (estimates in the late 1970s) from central Cairo to ten new settlements in the desert. Although not confirmed by other sources, he explained that the expected relocations outside of the Ring Road were to prevent those displaced from "infiltrating Cairo in case they protest and would be easier to control through the Ring Road" (Sabbour 2018). See Hussein Sabbour, "Hussein Sabbour yarwī qisat wa tarīkh inshā' al-qāhira al-jadīda," Interview by Ola Shousha. Biyūtina, Sada al-Balad, August 2, 2018. Video, 9:3, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mt7FYVr1BP4.

¹⁰⁶ Maisa al-Salakawi, "Takhsīs 230 million gineh istithmārāt li-istikmāl al-tarīq al-dā'i'rī li al-qāhira al-kubra," *al-Ahram*, 28 December 1998.

¹⁰⁷ Amal Saad, "The Ring Road Threatens 500 Families with Eviction," December 14, 1998; Adel al-Dib, "Removing Slums Around the Ring Road in Giza," *al-Ahram*, 15 September 1998.

¹⁰⁸ Mitch Rose, "The Problem of Power and the Politics of Landscape: Stopping the Greater Cairo ring road," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (2007): 460-476.

¹⁰⁹ See Anna Rowell, "Beyond the Bounds of the State: Reinterpreting Cairo's Infrastructures of Mobility," *Middle East – Topics and Arguments* 10 (June 2018): 60-70.

¹¹⁰ Aida Delpuech, "Egypt: Residents of Cairo's agricultural islands live under threat of displacement," *Middle East Eye*, August 02, 2022: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-cairo-agricultural-islands-residents-under-threat>; Many of the towns and quarters that the Road passes through also do not have physical access to it. Over time, they built their own ramps and staircases. See Paolo Patelli, "Ard El-Lewa: Inverse Infrastructure, Facts and Fiction," 2014: <https://paolopatelli.com/ard-el-lewa-infrastructure-fiction>.

over a three-year period to renovate the Ring Road.¹¹¹ The financial deal was signed under the tutelage of the Ministry of Transport, which has received large sums of public funds and foreign aid since 2014. According to Kamel al-Wazir, current Minister of Transport and former head of the Armed Forces Engineering Authority (AFEA), the Ministry is currently and successfully “reclaiming state land” around the Ring Road,¹¹² part of a wider campaign to reclaim “state land” in post-2011 Egypt.¹¹³ In a televised interview, al-Wazir explained that this resulted in two thousand (2,000) housing units being removed on both banks of the Road to make way for its expansion.¹¹⁴ This left eerie sights of gutted and demolished apartment blocks encircling the Ring Road until today. More importantly, it raises a question about how the Egyptian state once again deploys the Ring Road as a tool for acquiring land and for spatially and *infrastructurally* dispossessing and containing swathes of its population.¹¹⁵ For example, in its recent “Project for the Urban Restructuring of the Greater Cairo Region” in 2014, the GOPP fixates on ‘rural invasion’ as one of the primary patterns of unplanned settlement that warrant direct state intervention and containment in Greater Cairo.¹¹⁶ When discussing transport planning and the Ring Road, the World Bank Urban Transport Strategy Review (2000) warns of social unrest “encouraged by uncontrolled movements.”¹¹⁷ Remarkably, this logic of containment is not unique to Cairo but is inherent in the ring road as a global urban form. The World Bank’s Transport Manager for South Asia, Dr. Shomik Mehndiratta, explains that “the best way [for the state] to take land” is by “[drawing] a circle around the city and [calling] it a ring road.”¹¹⁸ He continues, “[it is] the most efficient way of circumscribing rural land. This means you have all the incentives for urban sprawl.”¹¹⁹ Thus, as the Ring Road continues to generate land for capital accumulation, it also creates spaces for ordered and governable urban settlement.¹²⁰

¹¹¹ Ahram Online, “NBE, Banque Misr sign EGP 1.8 bn protocol to revamp Ring Road,” *Ahram Online*, December 19, 2019: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/358076/Business/Economy/NBE,-Banque-Misr-sign-EGP--bn-protocol-to-revamp-R.aspx>

¹¹² Kamel al-Wazir, “Interview with Sada al-Balad: Kamel al-Wazir yakshif tafasīl tatwīr al-tarīq al-dā’irī,” minute 0:05 to 1:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0SvysEnA3o>.

¹¹³ Khalid Hassan, “Egypt’s Sisi vows to recover state land from squatters,” *Al-Monitor*, June 09, 2017: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/06/egypt-encroach-state-lands-sisi-army-police.html>

¹¹⁴ Al-Wazir, “Interview with Sada al-Balad.”

¹¹⁵ Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, “Capitalist Formations of Enclosure: Space and the Extinction of the Commons,” *Antipode* 47, no. 4 (2015): 999-1020.

¹¹⁶ General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP), “Project for the Urban Restructuring of the Greater Cairo Region – Report 1” (2014): 32.

¹¹⁷ Hubert Metge, “World Bank Urban Transport Strategy Review: The Case of Cairo, Egypt,” *The World Bank* (2000): 79.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Jamil Anderlini, “China’s rapid growth brings sprawl and missed opportunities,” *Financial Times*, September 21, 2010: <https://www.ft.com/content/63adecf6-c50f-11df-b785-00144feab49a>

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Currently, the first Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in Cairo is undergoing construction on the Ring Road. I read the BRT is an attempt to compete with, as well as further marginalize and criminalize, informal means of transport, like minibuses. On the politics of informal urban transport in Greater Cairo, see Dalia Wahdan, “Transport Thugs: Spatial Marginalization in a Cairo Suburb,” in *Marginality and Exclusion in Egypt*, edited by Ray Bush and Habib Ayeb (London: Zed Books, 2012): 112-132.

The State of Mobility Justice in Egypt

This brief snapshot of the Ring Road illustrates how it was planned and constructed as an infrastructure of not only capital accumulation, but also coercion and rule. It also shows how its current expansion project renews this purpose, where the Egyptian state deploys the Ring Road again as disciplinary tool. The Ring Road's contentious history and politics illuminate certain aspects about the character of the Egyptian state in relation to mobility, and about "the state of mobility justice" in Cairo.



Since the 1980s, the Egyptian state directly intervenes in Greater Cairo's (uneven) spaces and orders of mobility. Through the construction of large-scale mobility infrastructures, like the Ring Road, the state creates and upholds a regime of mobility that is uneven, disciplinary, and capital generating (for the state). The uneven geographies of urban mobility that characterize the Ring Road—the physical bypassing of entire neighborhoods, spatial containment, and dispossession—are the concrete building blocks of this mobility regime. Although the Egyptian Constitution, ratified in 2014, recognizes freedom of movement as a civil right (Article 42), Egypt has a long history of authoritarian state planning for urban and non-urban mobility alike.¹²¹ Historically, control "over movement was always central to the ways...by which different regimes establish and shape their particular political orders," whether in the colonial or post-colonial eras.¹²² The contemporary Egyptian state is no exception. The Ring Road demonstrates how a mobility regime in Egypt in an era of economic liberalization was formed around new economic and political priorities, new patterns of settlement, and newly dispossessed classes. It also shows the changes, continuities, and tensions of this mobility regime.

¹²¹ Aaron Jakes, "The Scales of Public Utility: Agricultural Roads and State Space," in *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance*, edited by Marilyn Booth and Anthony Gorman, 57-86 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

¹²² Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, 37.

Finally, it is important to note that the Egyptian state is by no means the sole actor in the construction and governance of urban mobility infrastructure in Cairo. Egypt is an important node in the global and regional mobility of capital, goods, and people in the Middle East and beyond. Foreign donors and international consultants are also significant actors in the country's transportation sector.¹²³ Moreover, the struggle for mobility justice in Cairo is always laden with the city's position at the intersection of regional and global capital, which I explore in further detail in the broader project. Yet, through its plans, policies, and disciplinary practices, the Egyptian state overwhelmingly sets the conditions of possibility for the movement of some people and some goods, and not others. Thus, to fully understand and analyze the state of mobility justice in Cairo, we ought to pay attention to the role and practices of the *state* in creating and upholding unequal mobility. One approach to understand the state's role is to dissect the interplay between capital and coercion on an urban scale. Historically, the dialectic between cities and states rested on the dynamics of capital and coercion, which correspond to cities and states respectively.¹²⁴ This interplay of capital and coercion, of political and economic power, characterizes mobility infrastructure. This is the backdrop, battleground, and state of mobility justice in Cairo and Egypt.

Conclusion

This report provided a brief analytical overview of the relationship between mobility, infrastructure, and the state in Egypt. Using the case of the Greater Cairo Ring Road, I analyzed *how* the Egyptian state governs through urban mobility infrastructure since the early 1980s. I situated the Ring Road in a political and theoretical discussion about unequal mobility and infrastructure. Specifically, I traced the dynamics of capital and coercion that underly the planning and construction of urban mobility infrastructure in Cairo. Doing so, I highlighted features of the Egyptian state's relationship with orders and infrastructures of mobility in Cairo and, in turn, about "the state of mobility justice" in both city and state. In the report, I did not focus on the role and practices of the state in creating unequal mobility at the expense of private actors and different scales involved in the construction and governance of urban mobility infrastructure in Cairo. Rather, I brought the state to bear on questions of mobility justice, as the Egyptian state continues to play a central and dynamic role in shaping and upholding Cairo's unequal mobility regime. Doing so, I aimed to connect the empirical case of Cairo to debates about mobility justice and to route those debates about theories of mobility justice back to Cairo.

¹²³ Japan International Cooperation Authority (JICA), "Misr National Transport Study (MINTS) – Report 2012."; Mohamed Hegazy, "Egypt Transport Policies 2014-2021," *Arab Reform Initiative* (2022): 1-14.

¹²⁴ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990—1992* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 5.

Infrastructure and the Fierce City: The Case of Manama

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Over the past decade, the Persian Gulf has experienced a dramatic spatial transformation, linked to broader infrastructural and developmental projects. From Qatar's hosting of the World Cup in 2022 to Saudi Arabia's *NEOM* project, infrastructural and spatial transformations are increasingly common, playing an integral in establishing Gulf states as major players in regional and global politics. Although dominated by the more powerful states, the everyday importance of infrastructure affects all states across the Gulf, shaping the construction of space albeit in dramatically different ways.

Space, for the Political Geographer Doreen Massey, is shaped through the interplay between global, hegemonic forces, and the intimately tiny aspects of daily life.¹²⁵ Constantly in flux, space reveals much about the intricacies of daily life and the ways in which power operates. Of particular interest for this study is the way in which sovereign power shapes the organisation of space and the ways in which this power is built into the infrastructural fabric of cities.

Using the concept of the 'fierce city', this short intervention reflects on the ways in which infrastructure – with a particular focus on highways – shapes the rhythms of daily life, ranging from the mundane - the commute to work, the school run, shopping, visiting friends and family - to the more exceptional, particularly seen in questions of security. In the Middle East, where instances of protest and counter revolution have become increasingly common, highways serve a dual role, both as integral to the development of infrastructure and as the bearers of meaning.

Bahrain in Middle Eastern Politics

Despite its diminutive size, Bahrain has long occupied a prominent role in Persian Gulf geopolitics due to its demographic makeup - home to a Shi'a majority - and its geographical proximity to both Saudi Arabia and Iran. This centrality has left it as a key site of competition in Gulf and Middle Eastern politics, often between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In the case of Bahrain, they also serve to embolden regional actors supporting the ruling Al Khalifa family. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran provoked widespread

¹²⁵ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005)

concern across the Middle East, exacerbated by Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's articulation of desires to export the revolution across the region.¹²⁶ The nascent Islamic Republic's foreign policy goals were anti-status quo, anti-monarchical and driven by a desire to support the politically, socially and economically marginalised people of the region.

The revolution existentially changed regional security calculations, perhaps most prominently seen in Saudi Arabia, where the establishment of a state which derived legitimacy from claims to Islamic leadership posed a fundamental challenge to the Al Saud's position in the Muslim world.¹²⁷ As a result of such concerns, the Saudi ruling family sought to double down in its support for key allies across the region. In Bahrain, situated a mere 16 kilometres from the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, the Sunni Al Khalifa family ruled over a Shi'a majority. In light of these concerns, the King Fahd causeway was constructed, linking the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and the western coast of Bahrain. Ostensibly built to deepen economic ties, the causeway provided Saudi forces with easy access to Bahrain in the event of serious unrest or invasion. For the first 25 years, the causeway was predominantly used by Saudis – and ex-patriate workers – to escape the Kingdom's strict rules around alcohol and socialising, yet with the onset of the Arab Uprisings in 2010, the causeway played a key role in a regional counter-revolution.

Manama: The Fierce City

After a decade of discontent emerging from socio-economic frustration and the absence of political reform - despite regular promises from the ruling family - latent anger amongst large swathes of Bahrain's population erupted in early 2011. Inspired by the uprisings which resonated across North Africa and into the Middle East, protesters took to the streets to express their anger at the status quo. Endemic corruption within the ruling family, ongoing processes of repression and the absence of political reform shaped a protest movement that drew support from across the political spectrum. Influenced by the protests that spread across the Middle East in early 2011, Bahrainis took to the streets demanding change. Chants of "not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini" rang out across Manama in a series of protests that emerged across Manama.¹²⁸ From the financial district to the Pearl Roundabout monument to the state's pearl diving heritage, protesters gathered at prominent sites to express their frustration at political inertia and seemingly endemic corruption in the ruling

¹²⁶ Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry," *Middle East Policy* 19:2 (2012), pp. 84-97

¹²⁷ Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes* (London: Palgrave, 2016)

¹²⁸ See Simon Mabon, "Regulating Resistance: From Anti to Counter-Revolutionary Practice – and Back Again – in Bahrain," *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 14:2 (special issue, 2021); Simon Mabon, "Sectarian Games: Sovereign Power, War Machines and Regional Order in the Middle East," *Middle East Law and Governance* 11:3 (2019), pp. 283-318.

family. Yet as the following months would demonstrate, the mechanisms of control deployed by the Al Khalifa were built into the very fabric of urban environments.

As John Nagle and I argue in a forthcoming piece, Manama serves as a paradigmatic example of the ‘fierce city’, an urban space that serves as a site of control, an arena in which the sovereign power of the Al Khalifa shapes all aspects of life.¹²⁹ Fierce cities are those where regimes enforce exclusionary visions of sovereign power, access to services, legislative processes, and the aesthetics of space and the city. The fierce city is a space wherein ruling elites regulate life in a way that reflects an existential struggle between communal groups, where structural violence in myriad forms reinforce the status quo, consolidating institutions and mechanisms of control deemed necessary to secure dominance.¹³⁰ Sharing similarities of Yiftachel and Yacobi’s conceptualisation of an *urban ethnocracy*, in which a dominant group appropriates the apparatus of the city to ensure domination and expansion in pursuit of the survival of the hegemonic group. Institutions are dominated by this hegemonic group to facilitate this, including in the use of urban planning. Those who mobilise in response to such conditions are thus framed as ungovernable.¹³¹

In contrast with the urban ethnocracy, the fierce city is found in a semi-authoritarian context with little need for the veneer of democracy. Beyond this, the mechanisms of sovereign power are deployed in all their forms to disenfranchise anyone deemed a threat. As we argue elsewhere, fierce cities are “ordered in such a way that the whims of ruling elites manifest spatially in the regulation of people’s right to the city, conditioned by the often unrestrained perceptions, needs and aspirations of those in power”.¹³² This spatial manifestation of the whims of those in power is seen across the canvas of the cityscape, but also in the development of the city’s infrastructure, designed in such a way as to support Al Khalifa sovereign power.

Infrastructure and Sovereign Power

Infrastructure across Bahrain had long been imbued with an exclusionary vision of the political constructed by the Al Khalifa’s form of sovereign power.¹³³ A *longue durée* examination of this vision reveals efforts to marginalise a number of different groups on the

¹²⁹ John Nagle and Simon Mabon, “Fierce and Accommodationist Divided cities: Understanding Right-to-the-City Protests in Beirut and Manama,” *Peacebuilding* (forthcoming)

¹³⁰ Oren Yiftachel and Haim Yacobi, “Urban Ethnocracy: Ethnicization and the Production of Space in an Israeli ‘Mixed City’” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21:6 (2003) and Oren Yiftachel. “The Internal Frontier: The Territorial Control of Ethnic Minorities,” *Regional Studies* 30 (1996), pp. 493-508.

¹³¹ Yiftachel and Yacobi, *Urban Ethnocracy*

¹³² Nagle and Mabon, “Fierce and Accommodationist Divided Cities”

¹³³ See Simon Mabon, *Houses Built on Sand: Violence, Sectarianism and Revolution in the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020)

grounds of group membership, including tribal, ethnic, sectarian and political collectives.¹³⁴ This vision of the political prompted the cultivation of a form of sovereign power designed to regulate all aspects of life across Bahrain and to ensure the survival of the Al Khalifa in the face of an array of parabolic challenges.¹³⁵

From the King Fahd causeway linking Bahrain to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, to the organisation of urban spaces, urban landscapes are bearers of identity and political meaning, whilst also serving as sites of competition and contestation. Infrastructural developments reflect Al Khalifa power and the need to respond to particular challenges. Yet space and infrastructure also provide opportunities to challenge Al Khalifa rule and their vision of the political.

During the protests of 2011, urban spaces across Bahrain became canvases for political expression, sites of contestation playing out in Arabic and English in an attempt to internationalise grievances.¹³⁶ From the competing graffiti narratives that adorned the walls of the souk to the choice of protest sites which drew attention to both a vision of unity and the corruption of the ruling elite, the protest movements capitalised on the spatial resources at their disposal.

Highways initially allowed protesters to coalesce in Manama and to disrupt the daily lives of commuters travelling to the financial district. As the Al Khalifa eviscerated the protest movement, highways became acceptable sites for limited expressions of dissent, predominantly through the burning of tyres; in these moments protesters and the security apparatus knew the rules of the game, what was deemed an acceptable expression of frustration and what was not.

Over time, highways became sites of contestation between protesters and security forces, albeit sites of contestation that were regulated by a set of informally agreed upon 'rules of the game' designed to prevent further escalation. In such spaces, the rhythms of protest and counter-protest played out within the broader contours of political life. Highways also connected rural and urban ways of life, with villagers - who were overwhelmingly Shi'a - travelling into Manama via highways to take part in protest. Regulating these highways and reinforcing a narrative of Al Khalifa sovereignty were additional mechanisms of control playing out across the fierce city, once more seeking to ensure regime survival.

In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, key highways across Bahrain became heavily militarised, sites regulated by the security apparatus of the state in an attempt to prevent

¹³⁴ See the work of Staci Strobl, Omar AlShehabi and Marc Owen Jones for more on this.

¹³⁵ These range from the popular protests of the Arab Uprisings to Pan Arabism, Marxism, Pan Islamism, and the fallout of the Iranian revolution.

¹³⁶ See Simon Mabon, "Sects and the City," in Simon Mabon and John Nagle (eds.). *Sectarianism and Urban Politics* (Lancaster: SEPAD, 2020).

continued unrest. In addition, they were also adorned with pro-Al Khalifa imagery, with banners depicting the King, Crown Prince and Prime Minister positioned at prominent points.

The heavily urbanised landscape of Bahrain and limited physical space places constraints on the infrastructural projects undertaken by the state. As a result, those that do take place are often politicised and undertaken to support those loyal to the Al Khalifa. Additional space is secured by reclaiming land from the sea - an expensive process undertaken by a number of states across the Gulf - yet this land is incredibly expensive – limiting its ownership to a small minority either members of or associated with the ruling family - and coming at a devastating environmental cost. For example, Bahrain's financial district is based on reclaimed land that was purchased by the erstwhile Prime Minister Khalifa Al-Khalifa at the price of 1 dinar. This purchase was reflective of the level of corruption in the Al Khalifa family and was a source of much anger during the protests of 2011.

Despite the initial optimism of expressions of unity in 2011, counter-revolutionary processes implemented by the regime divided the protesters in what has since become known as a form of sectarianisation.¹³⁷ In part, this strategy was predicated on exacerbating long-standing suspicions about Iranian sponsored fifth columnists amongst Bahrain's Shi'a communities. On a trip to Bahrain in 2014, one local gesticulating at the *souq*, proclaimed that "the Persians are everywhere". Such moves were enabled by the discursive framing of protesters as Shi'a and, by extension, Persian. This move allowed the protests to be viewed through the lens of national security, reinforced by the declaration of a state of emergency in March 2011. A nation-wide crackdown on protesters swiftly took place, with thousands fired from their jobs for taking part in the demonstrations or, in the case of medical professionals from the Salmaniya medical complex, for providing medical assistance.¹³⁸

These counter-revolutionary strategies capitalised on latent structural factors which had long fed into the construction of communal divisions. Yet these divisions also played out spatially and infrastructurally across the fierce city. In particular, the organisation of urban landscapes was designed in such a way to prevent interaction between people from different communal backgrounds.¹³⁹

Cross-communal engagement is long held to be a way of resolving societal divisions, yet the organisation of space in Bahrain was deliberately designed to prevent this from happening. Reflecting on a conversation with Sheikh Khaled in the 1980s, one former MP recalled the Sheikh saying "we established housing to have mixed Sunnis and Shias living together but it

¹³⁷ Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2017). See Toby Matthiesen's chapter in the volume for a discussion of sectarianisation in Bahrain.

¹³⁸ See: Mabon, *Regulating Resistance*

¹³⁹ Justin Gengler, "Segregation and Sectarianism: Geography, Economic Distribution and Sectarian Resilience in Bahrain," in Jeffrey Martini, Dalia Dassa Keye and Becca Wasser, *Countering Sectarianism in the Middle East* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2019), pp. 41-64.

did not work and the Sunnis and Shias did not want to live in one constructed city. It caused a lot of trouble for us”.¹⁴⁰

The failure to bring members of different communities together was widely acknowledged. When asked about this topic, one Bahraini politician criticised the “lack of integration of societies living in different spaces.”¹⁴¹ One consequence of this is the failure of a cohesive political discourse to emerge and, from this, the absence of political assimilation amongst individuals from different backgrounds. Erstwhile MPs also bemoaned the failure to attract people from other communities to their political movements.¹⁴² This point was further highlighted by politicians who recalled that the Al Khalifa were disinclined to hold meetings between representatives of different communities together, with former MPs lamenting the lack of direct dialogue between the ruling family and parties from different sects. While fundamentally political, these policies emerge from communal tensions within society but also manifest across the infrastructural and spatial landscapes of Bahrain.

Concluding Observations

Sovereign power regulates all aspects of life across time and space. This spatial component of sovereign power plays out in different ways, conditioned by the complexities and contingencies of local context. In Bahrain, the spatial component has resulted in particular forms of spatial organisation and a deliberate attempt to imbue infrastructural projects with meaning to reinforce Al Khalifa power. This process has resulted in the development of Manama as a fierce city, designed in such a way to enforce the rule of the Al-Khalifa and ultimately ensure the survival of a hegemonic group, albeit one that is in a demographic minority.

To understand the mechanisms through which the Al Khalifa’s sovereign power regulates life it is essential to reflect on the multifarious manifestations of this power. Whilst much has been written on the sectarianisation of the post-2011 landscape, more is needed on the role of infrastructure within the biopolitical machineries of sovereign power, in Bahrain and beyond.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with former Bahraini politician, 2019.

¹⁴¹ Interview with former Bahraini politician, 2020.

¹⁴² Interview with former Bahraini politicians, 2018-present day.

Securing Neoliberalism in the Free Economic Zones of Tangier

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After independence from France and Spain, Morocco was one of the first countries in the continent to promote the model of Free Economic Zones (FEZs). FEZs consist of massive hybrid territories within a state where taxes and other national regulations have been wavered or reduced in order to attract, mostly, foreign investment. Tangier, situated in the North of Morocco, is the city where this model becomes more evident. While FEZs and their 'attractiveness' must be situated within the genealogy of global capitalism, through its colonial and racial implications, the recent increase in areas and projects of this nature points at a specific model of Ong's "graduated sovereignty."¹⁴³ The FEZs are spaces of exceptional mobility regimes within a national territory, simultaneously fortified enclaves and connected spaces of global markets.

The historical entanglement between the security sector, territorial sovereignty and political power struggles seems obvious. Rulers have for centuries used their military power to conquest, defend their territories and defeat rivals. While greed is one of the drivers of war, and extraction of tributes one of the drivers of state building,¹⁴⁴ the relation between changing economic conditions and the evolution of security orders seems less evident. In Morocco, where state security plays a visible and central role in the preservation of the regime, the 1990s brought an increase in private security companies, along with the neoliberal agenda. Most of these companies were providing services to other private corporations and thus were part of the facility management sector. It is in FEZs that we can interrogate how this new landscape of private-public security relates to the economic context, and its implications for the preservation of a certain political and economic order. The focus of this paper is on the security order that protects these specific export-oriented areas, Morocco being one of the advanced promoters of this instrument as a way of attracting foreign capital to the country.

1. 'Free Zones' as hubs for global capitalism

Free Economic Zones (FEZs), Free Trade Zones, Offshoring Areas or Special Economic

¹⁴³ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁴⁴ Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628283.008>

Zones¹⁴⁵ are hectare-wide areas of industrial, urban land, designed to attract Foreign Direct Investment. The space is offered to foreign investors for special, advantageous conditions such as tax exemptions (custom-tariffs, implantation, etc.), simplified administrative procedures and specific technical training for potential workers.

These areas have proven increasingly interesting to capitalist actors around the globe since the beginning of the Cold War,¹⁴⁶ and progressively so with the loss of colonies and special dependency/favored relations. From the first aeroportuary free zone at Shannon Airport¹⁴⁷ in 1959, the model has proliferated to the point where there are an estimated 2,200 free zones around the world, employing around 70 million people.¹⁴⁸

The World Customs Organization defines a free zone or a special customs zone as “a part of the territory of a Contracting Party where any goods introduced are generally regarded, insofar as import duties and taxes are concerned, *as being outside the Customs territory*”¹⁴⁹ [italics mine]. Indeed, this model creates ambiguous sovereignties arranged into “an archipelago economy that consists of networked offshore spaces, or transnational enclave spaces.”¹⁵⁰ These enclaves of foreign capital attraction are created by state authorities as policies for export-oriented development, but it is the re-bordering of the sovereign territory, and the “graduation” of state authority which attracts global capital flows.¹⁵¹ Free Zones’ demarcations with their exceptional borders at the subnational level become a central mechanism of globalization.

2. Tanger-Med: a postcolonial hub

The city of Tangier might have been geographically destined to play a key role in the global commercial landscape. The city and its wider entourage are situated at a strategic location in the Strait of Gibraltar, where 20% of all maritime traffic goes through.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵ These zones can be called Special Economic Zones (a denomination first used in China), Free Trade Zones, Free Industrial Zones, depending on their specific sectorial orientation. In Morocco, Free Industrial Areas have recently (in 2020) been renamed as Industrial Acceleration Zones. In this paper I will use the name Free Economic Zone to refer generically to all these areas.

¹⁴⁶ Patrick Neveling, “Export processing zones and global class formation,” in James Carrier and Don Kalb (eds.) *Anthropologies of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 162-184.

¹⁴⁷ This was the first aeroportuary free zone, originally a FTZ, it rapidly transformed into an industrial zone (Barbiér & Veron 1991). One of the long-lasting harbours is the Freihafen in Hamburg, operating since 1888.

¹⁴⁸ World Free Zones Organization. Online: <https://www.worldfzo.org/About-Us/Our-history>

¹⁴⁹ Specific Annex D, Chapter 2 (Free Zone) of to the *Revised Kyoto Convention*. Online: <http://www.wcoomd.org/en/topics/facilitation/activities-and-programmes/free-trade-zone-special-customs-zone.aspx> (Retrieved 4/10/2019)

¹⁵⁰ Kleibert, “Offshore Spaces: Multi-Scalar Bordering Processes and the Segmented Mobilities of Capital and Labour in Asia,” 31.

¹⁵¹ Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*.

¹⁵² Oficina Económica y Comercial de España en Rabat, “Informe Económico y Comercial. Marruecos 2022.”

Its relevance in the progress of racial capitalism¹⁵³ was epitomized in the 1906 treaty of Algeciras, which forced the liberalization of trade in the negotiation between imperial powers, with the exclusion of Morocco's own rulers.¹⁵⁴ This colonial dimension is central in Morocco's case where the link between the *Banque d'État* and the imposed creation of the Police in Morocco was explicit and gave a central role to the maritime trade in Tangier. The police was created under the French auspices in order to ensure that Moroccan debt was repaid to the European Banks, and so "the institution of modern policing was colonial in form."¹⁵⁵ Tangier grew as an offshore banking and tax haven until the end of the 1950s and had been a pole for diplomatic missions for centuries.

In 1961, the Free Port in Tangier was created¹⁵⁶ perhaps to compensate for the elimination of Tangier's offshore banking system. These 'territorial exceptions' have been growing since the 1990s around the globe, and Morocco has positioned itself as one of the central 'hubs' for attraction of FDI in Africa. In the northern region of Tangier-Tetouan, 6 FEZs cover about 1400ha of land, with projects for expansion into a new Tech-oriented zone. These areas include industrial zones specialized in automotive, textile and aeronautical industries; logistical hubs and especially the free trade port outside of Tangier, the TangerMed Port.¹⁵⁷ Moral or physical Moroccan entities are not allowed to invest in some of these areas, and while the EU has warned Morocco against these fiscal, tax dumping policies, the Moroccan government has not altered its interest in maintaining and expanding this model for FDI attraction.

An engine of successful macro-economic figures for Morocco, the expansion of offshore and free economic zones epitomizes a total transformation of the geographical and environmental spaces of the north of Morocco. New macro-infrastructure are created through a complex of foreign and local investment and a specific legal and regulatory

¹⁵³ Racial capitalism is a concept first developed by Cédric Robinson whereby he contended that global capitalism can only be deployed through the ideology that naturalizes the domination by white Europeans, and the exploitation and dispossession of other peoples around the world. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

¹⁵⁴ Barbe, "Public Debt and European Expansionism in Morocco: From 1860 to 1956."

¹⁵⁵ Williams, "A State of Permanent Exception: The Birth of Modern Policing in Colonial Capitalism," 322.

¹⁵⁶ Decree 1-61-462, December 30th, 1961.

¹⁵⁷ The Tanger Free Zone, with 400ha dedicated to automobile, textile and aeronautical companies.

<https://goo.gl/maps/SREggNyDBhQFQ5vV7> The Tanger Med Industrial Platform 300ha, had in 2015 about 650 active companies

The MedHub, a Logistics Free Zone tending about 6m containers a year. About 150ha.

Tangier Automotive City (Cherafate), free exportation zone dedicated to car manufacturing and located halfway along the A4 Autoroute that links the TFZ and the Tanger Med Port. 600ha <https://goo.gl/maps/4vktZFBp5Uv7E92LA>

The Renault Tanger Med (Meloussa), exclusively for the French automotive company (Renault-Nissan), and the largest car plant in Africa (300ha). <https://goo.gl/maps/MVxCtmK1RhCBFA5c9>

Tetouan Park: 150 ha : light industrial units, light processing

Tetouan Shore 20ha

architecture that very graphically constructs an uneven geographical development of global capitalism.¹⁵⁸

3. Securing FEZs: isolation, specialization and the public-private partnership

The FEZs are constituted as global territories, or physical infrastructures “required in order to liberate other forms of capital and labor for easy spatial movement.”¹⁵⁹ As such, they are sustained by a specific security order that protects the material configurations of capitalism, and the relations between bodies, capital and space. In the Free Economic Zones, three dimensions of this security prevail.

The first dimension is spatial isolation. In Tangier, the ancient port is minutes away from the old city. Two decades ago, one just needed to climb up a steep ramp street to get to the *Souk Seghir* Square when stepping off a ferry from Europe. Now, the passengers’ port along with the commercial port has been moved away, and it takes more than 45 minutes by car on the A4 highway to reach the center of the city. It also takes 50 minutes from the airport, and above half an hour from the Tanger Automotive City, and the Renault Industrial Park. This distancing of the big economic projects (industrial and commercial), moving them away from where people live, may respond to a lack of space within inhabited urban areas. In its turn, however, like the world-wide consistent relocation of ports,¹⁶⁰ it also hyper-specializes the territory and it isolates it from any social dynamic other than labor. Solidarity, thus, with any labor rights violation, conciliation with other social or political roles becomes impossible or fragmented.

Secondly, with isolation comes specialization, with special zones focusing on labor-intensive sectors such as assembly lines for automotive, textile industries or fish processing plants. The specialization of space is evident in the names of these zones. From the generic Tanger Free Zone, that includes the six free zone areas of the region, to the Tanger Automotive City (999ha), exclusively dedicated to the automotive industry, and further, the Renault Industrial Park, a 300ha area where Renault-Nissan assembles its cars destined for the European and African continents.

About 100.000 workers are employed in these zones, and although the sex-disaggregate numbers are not available, the feminization of certain sectors such as textile and food processing is well known in Tangier, women being favorably employed by companies based

¹⁵⁸ Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*.

¹⁵⁹ Harvey, 101.

¹⁶⁰ Khalili, “Oceans of Finance and Commodification.”

on the assumption of their more docile behaviors.¹⁶¹ The spatial movements of industrial, commercial and labor-intense exploitation in the North of Tangier deprive those who can enter them of other social interactions beyond capitalism. The worker enters this space exclusively to work, the places can only be temporary inhabited and transited by those holding a direct relation to its economic function. It is the companies' employees and service providers who are allowed inside. It is thus a secluded society of individuals built on labor and economic ties, and directed by non-Moroccan companies and their employment policies and preferences.

In the FEZs "some aspects of state power are taken up by foreign corporations."¹⁶² The state remains the main authority and it continues to fulfill some of its functions, such as regulating private property or providing trained and specialized workers. The state and public training provided to workers for specialized tasks within the industrial sector, thus, responds not so much to the "formation of industrial labor and labor reserves"¹⁶³ for the needs of the global capital. In this sense, FEZs are part of the 'internationalization' of the state, where the 'privilege' of those who can access the zones is regulated and disposed by the state but based on global market calculations.¹⁶⁴

4. Public-private security assemblages and re-bordering 'global territories'

Security is also physically performed through a public-private security arrangement. Free zones are protected in its perimeter as bordered islands, by "carceral measures [...] linked to previous forms of global racial ordering."¹⁶⁵ The spatial deployment of free economic zones is very telling. The customs officers are situated at the entries of these areas, with custom offices and gates that resituate border regimes within the same national territory. While we are still in Morocco, the feeling is ambiguous. Companies raise their flags like embassies abroad, transnational corporations pledging allegiance to a world of nation-states, while investing offshore.

Once inside, everyday security in the zones, its roads and 'common' space is provided not by public forces, but by a private company employed by the TMSA (Tanger Med Special Authority), in its turn a public-private authority. What this means, as Shearing & Stenning¹⁶⁶ warned us for mass private spaces, is that the client-defined mandate of commercial security

¹⁶¹ ILO, "Zones Franches, Droits Des Travailleurs et Stratégies Syndicales MAROC."

¹⁶² Park, "Spatially Selective Liberalization and Graduated Sovereignty," 852.

¹⁶³ Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism*, 67.

¹⁶⁴ Kleibert, "Offshore Spaces: Multi-Scalar Bordering Processes and the Segmented Mobilities of Capital and Labour in Asia."

¹⁶⁵ Axster et al., "Colonial Lives of the Carceral Archipelago: Rethinking the Neoliberal Security State."

¹⁶⁶ "Private Security: Implications for Social Control."

is oriented towards preserving the interests of the clients, rather than the law and the public interest. The security guard at the factory is tasked with ensuring workers' compliance with the company's goals and behaviors, rather than national law. Thus, while freedom of association is guaranteed by the Moroccan Labor Code that applies inside the FEZs, pressure against unionized workers and the scarce labor inspections penetrating the FEZs has been regularly denounced.¹⁶⁷

The private security mandate and the subsequent allocation of resources necessarily means a focus on a specific kind of offenders: "those who create opportunities for threats against the interests of the client,"¹⁶⁸ such as less productive behaviors in the work place. The focus is thus not crime, but to protect the profits of the client. The pervasiveness of private security increases alongside privately owned or privately managed land, both deriving its "legitimacy from the institution of private property."¹⁶⁹

5. Conclusion: New Security order

The special territoriality of FEZs coincides with the changing dynamics between private and public security, especially in the evolution of police and its link to the mode of production.¹⁷⁰ The emergence of new private security contractors, coinciding with the neoliberal era, seems a coherent phenomenon within the drive for privatization of state functions. This is nevertheless not a new phenomenon, since 'guards for rent' and mercenaries are in fact the historical origin of capitalist state violence.¹⁷¹ The mode of production and its spatial configuration relate to the model of security and its private-public architecture, from the River Thames Police funded by the West Indian Company, to the Pinkerton guards protecting mines and busting strikes in the North American company towns of the 19th century. In Tangier, a hybrid security order sustains the extension of different specialized economic zones designed for the needs of global trade networks. The development of Free Economic Zones in the city and across Morocco is part of the current cartography of the territories of global capitalism. Their special conditions for labor and capital movements reconfigure the relation between security/border regimes and the neoliberal economy. The unequal deployment of state authority; the specialization and privatization of land in these zones, with

¹⁶⁷ ILO, "Zones Franches, Droits Des Travailleurs et Stratégies Syndicales MAROC"; ILO, "978-92-2-128613-4."

¹⁶⁸ Shearing and Stenning, "Private Security: Implications for Social Control," 501.

¹⁶⁹ Shearing and Stenning, "Private Security: Implications for Social Control."

¹⁷⁰ Steven Spitzer has developed an interesting Marxist theory of crime and police. See: Spitzer, Steven. "Marxist Perspectives in the Sociology of Law." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1983, pp. 103–124. Spitzer, Steven. "Conflict and Consensus in the Law Enforcement Process. Urban Minorities and the Police." *Criminology*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1976, pp. 189–212; Spitzer "The Political Economy of Policing"; Spitzer and Scull, "Privatization and Capitalist Development: The Case of the Private Police."

¹⁷¹ Kempa, "The 'Private' Origin of Modern 'Public' Policing"; Spitzer and Scull, "Privatization and Capitalist Development: The Case of the Private Police."

different bordering regimes; and an enhanced cooperation between private and public security, promote a return to private policing and client-oriented security that challenge the existing notions of sovereignty.

Infrastructure and reconstruction, the UAE, and Pope Francis in Mosul

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On March 5, 2021, Pope Francis landed in Baghdad for a three-day visit to Iraq. The main landmark of his trip was his presence at the al-Tahera church in Mosul, where he held a mass praising religious unity and tolerance. Yet, the al-Tahera church, the entire Church square, and some other projects in the city are part of Revive the Spirit of Mosul, a program managed by UNESCO but largely funded by the UAE aimed at rebuilding the old city center. So, what was the goal of the Pope in Mosul, and who benefited from it?

This contribution explores the intersection of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) foreign policy goals with those of Pope Francis in Iraq between 2018 and 2022, as well as other state and non-state actors such as UNESCO. It claims that heritage reconstruction projects provide the terrain for other actors to intervene, advance their agendas, and potentially form new alliances. More specifically, the Iraqi case study describes how the UAE has used Pope Francis as a bridge to advance its goals in Iraq by developing and promoting a narrative of religious tolerance shared with the Vatican.

The triangular collaboration Pope Francis-UAE-UNESCO focuses on heritage sites destroyed by the Islamic State, an intervention that adds up to the participation of the UAE in projects of reconstruction in the Middle East. The cases of the al-Saa'a and al-Tahera churches, or the al-Nouri mosque complex in Mosul, are examples of this approach and blur the division between development aid, the business of reconstruction, and heritage infrastructure.

UAE-Iraq relations shed light on how Gulf countries have become the new center of the Middle East, as several scholars have shown from the disciplines of cultural studies, international relations, and political economy.¹⁷³ Here, heritage infrastructure proves UAE's leverage in the Middle East and globally, as the country is redrawing networks of political and economic dependency in its favor.

¹⁷² The author wishes to express his gratitude to Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal. This piece originated in conversation with her, and it largely draws from her ideas.

¹⁷³ See Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "Gulf Cities Emerge As New Centers of Arab World," *Al Monitor*, October 8, 2013. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/abu-dhabi-dubai-doha-arab-centers.htm>; Abdelkhaleq Abdulla, "Khaleeji Cities Are Present, Future," *Al Monitor*, October 20, 2013. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/gulf-dubai-doha-abu-dhabi-center-arab-world.html>; Adam Hanieh, *Money, Markets and Monarchies. The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Pope Francis in Iraq and Revive the Spirit of Mosul

Revive the Spirit of Mosul has been one of the UNESCO flagship programs during the tenure of Audrey Azoulay, elected in 2017 after winning over the Qatari Hamad bin Abdulaziz Al Kuwari.¹⁷⁴ Focusing on heritage, cultural life, and education, it aimed at prioritizing “the human dimension”¹⁷⁵ of reconstruction after the Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq held in Kuwait in 2018 successfully managed to gather funds for infrastructure in a traditional sense (roads, logistics, hospitals, or industry). As with the conference in Kuwait, the main donor for Revive the Spirit of Mosul has been the UAE with \$50.4 million (almost half of the total), followed by the European Union’s contribution of \$38.5 million, and other countries, including Japan or Canada with smaller amounts.¹⁷⁶

The program focuses on the reconstruction of the al-Hadba minaret, the al-Nouri mosque, the al-Saa’a and al-Tahera churches, and what UNESCO describes as “heritage houses,” all enclosed in a relatively tight space in the center of Mosul. While there are other projects centered around rebuilding schools, professional training, and preventing religious radicalism, the main aspect of the project is religious heritage, therefore giving the initiative a clear religious yet multiconfessional essence. In fact, one of the main narrative tropes in the project considers the quality of Mosul as a site that has historically brought together different religions, cultures, and ethnicities.¹⁷⁷

The narrative also emphasizes the particular attack that the Islamic State inflicted on the character of the city as it was erasing this historical notion of difference. First, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the caliphate from the al-Nouri mosque in 2014, before setting up explosives to tear it down in 2017 during the battle that gained back Mosul from the Islamic State. During those three years, the Islamic State also damaged and looted the churches of al-Saa’a and al-Tahera, as well as other parts of the city. Between the takeover of the Islamic State in 2014 and the city’s liberation in 2017, around 80% of the old center of Mosul was destroyed.¹⁷⁸

The visit of the Pope in 2021 was widely celebrated by UNESCO as an “accelerator of peace.”¹⁷⁹ From the Church Square in Mosul, Pope Francis proclaimed that “[a]s in one of

¹⁷⁴ Romain Houeix, “Audrey Azoulay, une femme de culture et de cinéma à la tête de l’Unesco,” *France 24*, October 12, 2017. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/fr/20171012-unesco-france-audrey-azoulay-cinema-candidate-presidence-qatar-egypte-culture>

¹⁷⁵ UNESCO, Revive the Spirit of Mosul, Brochure. Available at: https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/07/mosul_20220708_brochure_eng_1_0.pdf

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁷⁷ The report often refers to the word Mosul (*al-mawsil*) meaning linking point or junction, to back up this narrative.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ UNESCO, UNESCO welcomes the Pope’s visit to Mosul, a symbol of solidarity and an accelerator of peace, March 5, 2021. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-welcomes-popes-visit-mosul-symbol-solidarity-and-accelerator-peace>

your intricately designed carpets, one small thread torn away can damage the rest,” referring to the damage inflicted on the Christian communities by the Islamic State, before describing the al-Saa’a church and the al-Nouri mosque as “two signs of the perennial human desire for closeness to you.”¹⁸⁰

The discourse of tolerance and Emirati foreign policy

The Pope also held an interreligious encounter in Ur and met with other Christian figures in Baghdad before returning to Italy on March 8. Throughout his visit, he emphasized the multiconfessional character of Iraq, quoting the memorandum he signed in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019 with Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar.¹⁸¹

This memorandum, a successful example of Emirati religious diplomacy, paved the way for further collaboration between Abu Dhabi and the Vatican and facilitated the opening of a Vatican embassy in that same city in 2022.¹⁸² However the visit that led to the publication of the document was also received with important critiques. Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Human Rights Watch, expressed these grievances in an open letter to the Pope asking him to condemn the human rights violations committed systematically by the UAE. The letter specifically refers to the political and religious repression taking place within the UAE and the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Yemen, of which Abu Dhabi has been one of the main instigators.¹⁸³

Similarly, Ali al-Qaradaghi, head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, related to the Muslim Brotherhood and headquartered in Doha, also referred to human rights violations but centered the message around the UAE-sanctioned blockade against Qatar.¹⁸⁴ The statement of Ali al-Qaradaghi shows how the interests of the UAE in stretching their

¹⁸⁰ Pope Francis, Prayer of Suffrage of the Victims. Mosul, March 7, 2021. Available at:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/prayers/documents/papa-francesco_pregchiere_20210307_preghiera-iraq.html

¹⁸¹ The Grand Imam of al-Azhar is considered one of the maximum authorities in Sunni Islam. See the document, Pope Francis and Ahmad al-Tayyeb, A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, February 4, 2019. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html See also Pope Francis, Meeting with Authorities, Civil Society, and the Diplomatic Corps. Address of His Holiness. Baghdad, March 5, 2021. Available at:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/march/documents/papa-francesco_20210305_iraq-autorita.html

¹⁸² Varun Godinho, “Abu Dhabi: Vatican Opens Embassy in UAE,” *Gulf Business*, February 7, 2022. Available at: <https://gulfbusiness.com/abu-dhabi-vatican-opens-embassy-in-uae/>

¹⁸³ Sarah Leah Whitson, Letter to Pope Francis. February 3, 2019. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/hrw_letter_uae_papal_visit.pdf

¹⁸⁴ See: <https://iumsonline.org/ru/ContentDetails.aspx?ID=9076#>

relationship with the Vatican are conflated with the blockade, as it would help the UAE gain religious credibility.

In this sense, Qatar had been spreading its influence across the Arab world using religion as a channel through its sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE, instead, had been deploying a narrative of ferocious anti-Islamic fundamentalism, a category in which they included the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁸⁵ To legitimize this strategy beyond its rivalry with Qatar in the Arab world, the UAE developed a discourse of tolerance that was embodied by institutions like a Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence, a National Festival of Tolerance, the declaration of 2019 as the Year of Tolerance, a Tolerance Bridge in Dubai, or the Mariam Umm Eisa mosque, consecrated to the Virgin Mary.¹⁸⁶ The signature of the *Document on Human Fraternity* between Ahmad al-Tayyeb and Pope Francis in February 2019 can be understood as part of this strategy.

However, the Pope argued that the content of the declaration follows the ideas of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁸⁷ Yet, the declaration's language aligns with the Emirati narrative of tolerance, presenting itself as “an appeal to those who cherish the values of tolerance and fraternity that are promoted and encouraged by religions.” Later on, it refers to more specific issues that echo recent conflicts in Iraq and the Middle East, as it calls “to stop supporting terrorist movements fuelled by financing, the provision of weapons and strategy, and by attempts to justify these movements even using the media.”¹⁸⁸

The content and language of the document show a convergence of interests between the Vatican and the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, the events that have taken place in Iraq and other places under the umbrella of this tolerance seem to have extended the influence of both actors. This seems especially true for the UAE, which has a bad name for many Iraqis due to claims of having financed the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in the Middle East.¹⁸⁹ Investing political capital in alliances with religious leaders like the Pope or in cultural projects like Revive the Spirit of Mosul can help change this image.

¹⁸⁵ David H. Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Routledge: 2022)

¹⁸⁶ See: <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/culture/tolerance/tolerance-initiatives> This narrative has also received criticism from Human Rights Watch. See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/01/uae-tolerance-narrative-sham-0>

¹⁸⁷ Pope Francis, Press Conference on the Return Flight to Rome, March 8. Available at:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/march/documents/papa-francesco_20210308_iraq-volo-ritorno.html

¹⁸⁸ Pope Francis and al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Fraternity*.

¹⁸⁹ Benjamin Isakhan and Lynn Meskell, “UNESCO’s Project to ‘Revive the Spirit of Mosul’: Iraqi and Syrian Opinion on Heritage Reconstruction After the Islamic State,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 25, no. 11 (2019), p. 1197.

The business of reconstruction

Some of these critiques go further and argue that reconstruction is actually rooted in political agendas rather than geared towards the benefit of Iraqis. They try to spread an image of reconciliation “in communities still riven with deep-seated ethnic and religious tensions,” despite some welcoming the interest of foreign donors if the influx of money helps rebuild robust ties between these communities.¹⁹⁰

Interestingly, the political agendas of Iraq and the UAE have been increasingly aligned after the downfall of ex-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whom Emirati officials accused of pursuing a program of sectarian and exclusionary politics.¹⁹¹ In 2018, Mustafa al-Kadhimi took office and shifted their orientation towards the UAE. Soon after becoming Prime Minister, he visited both the UAE and Saudi Arabia on friendly terms, securing investments mostly in infrastructure relevant to Emirati interests like the Umm Qasr port or the Rasheed Air Base.¹⁹² More recently, the UAE has committed to invest \$10 billion on top of the previous aid focused on electricity infrastructure to help with reconstruction.¹⁹³ The momentum for UAE-Iraq relations was also captured in a volume produced by the Emirates Diplomatic Academy in 2018 with the title *Consolidating the Iraqi State: Challenges and Opportunities*.¹⁹⁴

The size of the investments that the UAE has made for the UNESCO project Revive the Spirit of Mosul and at the conference for reconstruction in Kuwait are part of this trend of increased proximity between both countries. But as scholars like Adam Hanieh have noted, reconstruction projects are also an important business opportunity for the UAE real estate conglomerates that operate primarily in the Middle East.¹⁹⁵

The involvement of the UAE in the reconstruction of Mosul was particularly visible in the case of the al-Nouri mosque. In November 2020, the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, the Iraqi Sunni Endowment, and UNESCO issued a competition for architectural firms to propose a project

¹⁹⁰ Benjamin Isakhan and Sofya Shahab, “The Islamic State’s Targeting of Christians and their Heritage: Genocide, Displacement and Reconciliation,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 28, no. 7 (2022), p. 829.

¹⁹¹ Arab News. “UAE Recalls Envoy to Iraq, Slams ‘Sectarian Policies,’” June 18, 2014. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/588586/%7B%7B>

¹⁹² Mehmet Alaca and Hamdullah Baycar, Iraq as a Theatre for the Gulf’s Geostrategic Ambitions, LSE Middle East Blog, June 29, 2021. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/06/29/iraq-as-a-theatre-for-the-gulfs-geostrategic-ambitions/> See also: United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, UAE announces \$3 bn Investment in Iraq: Joint Statement, April 5, 2021. Available at: <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2021/4/5/05-04-2021-uae-iraq>

¹⁹³ Dana Abdelaziz, “MENA Project Tracker - Abu Dhabi Allocates \$10bn to Utilities; Iraq Completes Reconstruction Projects Despite Setbacks,” *Arab News*, May 12, 2022. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2080831/business-economy>

¹⁹⁴ Emirati Diplomatic Academy, *Consolidating the Iraqi State: Challenge and Opportunities* (Abu Dhabi: Emirati Diplomatic Academy, 2018)

¹⁹⁵ Adam Hanieh, *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 238

for the al-Nouri mosque complex, with a \$50,000 prize funded by the UAE. The jury featured important Emirati figures, like Amel Chabbi, head of conservation at the Department of Culture and Tourism in Abu Dhabi,¹⁹⁶ and was also closely followed by Noura bint Mohammed Al Kaabi, Minister of Culture and Youth in the UAE, who praised the step forward taken by the UAE in Mosul.¹⁹⁷

The Egyptian firm Hareedy won the contest with a project that has been largely criticized for looking like a Khaleeji building photoshopped in Iraq. As reported by the *New York Times*, Ihsan Fethi, Iraqi architect, called it “a fiasco” and “a terrible tragedy for us.” The Iraqi Society of Engineers opposed the project in a public statement and the Iraqi Architectural Heritage Preservation Society complained about the alien architectural elements and transplanted trees that betrayed Iraqi heritage. The feature of a VIP balcony also became a contentious issue for the public and experts alike, since mosques are not supposed to segregate people according to their status or financial might.¹⁹⁸

The complex, in any case, faces the same problems that many other UNESCO-led projects have faced elsewhere. The mere concept of world heritage and its implementation has been criticized by practitioners and academics for proposing a de-localized approach that extracts heritage from its venue, putting it on a map of cosmopolitan cultural landmarks.¹⁹⁹

Some grassroots initiatives provided another view of reconstruction and infrastructure in Mosul that the UNESCO project did not acknowledge. The city had been living in ruins for years, and these ruins had become part of the daily life of Mosul. Ali al-Baroodi, who teaches translation at the University of Mosul, has been capturing city life with his photographs in what he defines as *Mosulography*.²⁰⁰ While *Revive the Spirit of Mosul* followed an approach that largely ignores the years of conflict, Mosul residents show how life kept going during the years of the Islamic State. Ruins became part of daily life, despite their disruptive nature.

In his photographic essay for *Newlines Magazine*, Ali al-Baroodi depicts the intricacies of the relationship between people and infrastructure, destruction, and reconstruction in the old city of Mosul. Families were evacuated to then return despite the risks from skyrocketing rents in other parts of the city. Priests documented the stages of rehabilitation of churches and other

¹⁹⁶ Lilly Cao, “Meet the Winners for the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of Mosul’s Al Nouri Complex,” ArchDaily, April 16, 2021. Available at: <https://www.archdaily.com/959744/meet-the-winners-for-the-reconstruction-and-rehabilitation-of-mosuls-al-nouri-complex>

¹⁹⁷ Arab News, “Egyptian Architects Win UNESCO Competition to Rebuild Mosul’s Al-Nouri Mosque,” April 15, 2021. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1843501/%7B%7B>

¹⁹⁸ Jane Arraf, “‘A Fiasco’: Redesign Around Mosul Landmark Prompts Outcry,” *New York Times*, June 27, 2021. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/27/world/middleeast/unesco-mosul-reconstruction.html>

¹⁹⁹ Lynn Meskell, *A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

²⁰⁰ See his photographic blog: <https://500px.com/p/alialbaroodi2000?view=photos>

religious sites, as in Mar Toma, a church that dates back to the 7th century. Graffiti served as a means to communicate whether there were unexploded bombs in the area, a family living there, or a house for sale.²⁰¹

The Pope centered his discourse on tolerance and bringing together different communities but failed to acknowledge this conflict as part of Mosul's history. The UNESCO project, while providing some aid to restore some of the houses of central Mosul, didn't consider these stories when proposing the projects of reconstruction of the al-Nouri mosque and the churches of al-Saa'a and al-Tahera, the cornerstones of the initiative.

Conclusions

The visit of the Pope to Mosul in March 2021 ultimately signaled acquiescence from one of the most important global religious leaders, if not approval, to this reconfiguration of alliances in the Middle East. As much as his words carried an important message for Mosul, his visit revealed more about the shifting dynamics in the political economy of the region than what could have been a notable reconstruction project for Mosul, a city that had been enduring conflict since the American invasion of 2003.

Along with Pope Francis, the UAE and UNESCO deployed a narrative of tolerance and fraternal unity parallel to a reconstruction program that largely ignored local communities. As a consequence, the project that won the contest for the new design of the al-Nouri mosque has been largely criticized by the Iraqi civil society, and is perceived as a Khaleeji transplant.

As it turns out, the destruction of religious heritage in Iraq has created a window of opportunity for other actors to intervene. The visit of the Pope to Mosul ultimately shows an intersection between Vatican diplomacy and UAE interests in Iraq and the Middle East. Under the umbrella of UNESCO and its project Revive the Spirit of Mosul, the UAE has managed to spread a discourse of tolerance that ultimately echoes its increased political and economic presence in Iraq.

Furthermore, the visit of Pope Francis is not an isolated event but part of a series of diplomatic moves that the Vatican has been taking vis-à-vis the UAE in the past decade. The *Document on Human Fraternity*, signed in Abu Dhabi between the Pope and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, and the opening of a Vatican embassy in the UAE, demonstrate how the

²⁰¹ Ali al-Baroodi, "Mosul's Walls Tell a Story of Brutality and Recovery," Newlines Magazine, July 7, 2022, available online: <https://newlinesmag.com/photo-essays/mosuls-walls-tell-a-story-of-brutality-and-recovery/> Mar Toma has received the support of the French Institut National du Patrimoine, see: <https://www.aliph-foundation.org/en/projects/mosul-mosaic-restoration-of-the-mar-toma-syriac-orthodox-church>

religious diplomacy of Pope Francis and the foreign policy of the UAE go hand in hand in the post-Arab Spring scenario.

However, it is striking how Pope Francis, whose papacy has been openly vocal for social justice and against war, has accepted this discourse of tolerance without further question. Organizations like Human Rights Watch have issued warnings referring to the UAE's track record on human rights abuses within and outside the country, with notable examples like the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

In brief, the UAE, the Pope, and UNESCO have encountered common interests that seem to grant enough benefit for all of them to overlook potential contradictions or conflicts of interest.



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