Munir Fakher Eldin

From Taxation to Dispossession: Land Governance and the Colonization of Palestine

Federico Cugurullo, Isobel Lee & Rebecca Weir

Cyberpunk Urban Fantasies in the Gulf: The Line as an Incubator of Modernization in Saudi Arabia and Beyond

AL-MUNTAQA

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ARAB STUDIES

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It is with great pleasure that we present this new issue of *Al-Muntaqa*, which brings together a diverse collection of research articles, two reflections, an Arab Opinion Index analysis, and two book reviews. Collectively, these contributions revisit colonial legacies in the Arab region, and shed light on current social and political transformations, digital engagement, and imagined urban futures. Palestine remains in focus, with a historical study on land governance and Israeli colonization of the country, and the interplay between the Ottoman past and the colonial present; an essay on Israel's apartheid practices in Jerusalem; another on the systematic erasure of Palestinian history in the West Bank; and a book review on the Beersheba region. The article on the impact of the war on Syrian communities and families, and the one on civil society and democratic transition in Tunisia provide some insights into the broader aftermath of the Arab uprisings. A main feature of this volume is the focus on urban development in Saudi Arabia, a topic of great interest and of utmost urgency given the rapid and drastic changes in the Kingdom.

The opening article in this issue is Munir Fakher Eldin's "*From Taxation to Dispossession: Land Governance and the Colonization of Palestine*". It traces the evolution of land governance in Palestine from the late Ottoman era through the British Mandate to Israeli colonialism. Fakher Eldin highlights how land became both a tool of colonial control and the central terrain of Palestinian resistance.

In "*Protecting the Syrian Family: Community Reconstruction and the Unseen Consequences of War*", Araa Aljaramani examines how humanitarian interventions in Syria have neglected the role of the family as a social anchor. By overlooking shifts in gender roles and child-rearing practices under conditions of protracted conflict, international organizations have often exacerbated social dislocations rather than alleviated them.

The third article, Mehdi Mabrouk's "*The Illusion of the Tunisian Exception: Civil Society and Democratic Transition*", challenges the narrative of Tunisia's democratic exceptionalism. Mabrouk shows how civil society, far from safeguarding democracy, played a role in its erosion by intensifying polarization and undermining state legitimacy.

Two contributions adapted from the 11th Gulf Studies Forum at ACRPS (30 November-1 December 2024) turn to Saudi Arabia's urban structures. In "*The Role of Urban Transformation in Saudi Arabia's Nation-building: The Case of al-Balad, Jeddah*", Rufei Li situates the transformations of Jeddah's historic district within the broader trajectory of state-building in KSA. Federico Cugurullo, Isobel Lee, and Rebecca Weir, in "*Cyberpunk Urban Fantasies in the Gulf: The Line as an Incubator of Modernization in Saudi Arabia and Beyond*", interrogate Saudi Arabia's most ambitious and bold urban project. They show how The Line draws heavily on Western cyberpunk imaginaries of hypermodern cities.

We also introduce a new section titled "Reflections", featuring "*Jerusalem: A Closed City*", which powerfully illustrates how Israeli closure policies have fragmented Palestinian life. By turning Jerusalem into a restricted and checkpoint-ridden space, these policies have denied generations of Palestinians access to a city long considered the cultural and spiritual heart of the region. Along with the article on land governance

in Palestine, and the two articles on urban transformations in KSA, these contributions make "land" in this issue a common and central theme, complemented by a cover page featuring an artistic illustration related to land. In the second reflection, "The Whitewashing of History in a Time of Genocide", Mostafa Minawi powerfully exposes the systematic erasure of Palestinian history, memory, and identity under occupation observed through his brief teaching experience in al-Khalil.

The Arab Opinion Index's analytical report, "*Social Media Use, Trust, and Surveillance in the Arab Region: Insights from the Arab Opinion Index (2024–2025)",* by Laila Omar, Wajd Beshara, and Nour Chibani, highlights both widespread reliance on digital platforms and anxieties over misinformation, censorship, and surveillance.

We conclude with two book reviews. Mansour Nasasra reviews *Beersheba Region, Southern Ottoman Palestine: Land, Society, and State*, and Habib Nahdi reviews *Death Between Society and Culture*, both ACRPS book publications.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue reaffirm *Al-Muntaqa*'s mission to engage with the Arab region's rich history and complex realities, providing rigorous and timely scholarship that enriches global conversations on the regions' history, present and future.

ARTICLES

Munir Fakher Eldin*

From Taxation to Dispossession: Land Governance and the Colonization of Palestine**

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من الكوشان إلى الكارافان: نحو إطار تاريخي لدراسة حوكمة الأرض واستعمار فلسطين

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Abstract: This study examines the history of land governance in Palestine from the late Ottoman era to the Israeli occupation that began in 1948, focusing on the structural transformations that shaped land tenure and control. It explores rent, ownership, and spatial planning as interrelated spheres for understanding the conflict's dynamics. The study addresses how Ottoman law was utilized to regulate land ownership and how the British Mandate introduced significant reinterpretations of ownership that served broader colonial objectives. It also analyses the tools employed by the Israeli occupation to dispossess Palestinians, including legal mechanisms, expropriation, and spatial planning, while highlighting the historical, social, and political dimensions of the fight for land.

Keywords: Land Governance; Israeli Occupation; Ottoman Law; British Mandate; Spatial Planning.

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الملخص: تتناول هذه الدراسة تاريخ حوكمة الأرض في فلسطين منذ أواخر العهد العثماني وحتى الاحتلال الإسرائيلي عام 1948، مع التركيز على التغيرات البنيوية في إدارة الحيازة والسيطرة على الأرض. وتقدم الريع والملكية والتخطيط الحيزي بوصفها مساحات مترابطة لفهم الصراع. وتوضح الدراسة كيفية استخدام القانون العثماني لتقنين حيازة الأرض، وما تلاه من تحوّلات خلال فترة الانتداب البريطاني، حيث أُعيد تشكيل مفاهيم الملكية وارتباطها بالسيطرة الاستعمارية. وتناقش أدوات الاحتلال الإسرائيلي لنزع ملكية الفلسطينيين عبر القوانين والمصادرة والتخطيط الحيزي، مسلّطًا الضوء على الأبعاد التاريخية والاجتماعية والسياسية للصراع على الأرض.

كلمات مفتاحية: حوكمة الأرض؛ الاحتلال الإسرائيلي؛ القانون العثماني؛ الانتداب البريطاني؛ التخطيط الحيزي.

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Introduction

This study examines the conflict over land in Palestine over time, shedding light on the structural aspects of tenure governance and land control, and identifying points of historical continuity and discontinuity since the late Ottoman era. One cause of ambiguity regarding this matter is ahistorical references to the Ottoman Land Code and *tapu* (title deed),[1] allowing for manipulation by Israel's colonial occupation regime to dispossess Palestinians of lands passed down through generations, laying siege to their presence and future on the land through, for example, the use of the concept of "*mawat*" (dead/unused) land in Israeli military orders to seize territory historically connected to Palestinian villages and reclassify it as "state land".

However, the ability to produce an Ottoman *tapu* deed (or *kushan tapu*, as it is referred to in Palestine and Jordan) remains by far the strongest legal defence of Palestinian land ownership in Israeli courts, as it provides documentation of an irrefutable historical fact. Such a deed is considered the gold standard in proving ownership and may help settle particular cases in favour of Palestinians.[2] Oddly, then, Ottoman law and *tapu* deeds have been treated as both the malady and the cure.

The judicial perspective on the Ottoman *tapu* deed eschews the social, economic, and political contexts that govern land relations; that is, the policies, systems, customs, and socio-economic power relations that determine the nature of ownership and the modes of land control and use. I argue here that, to better grasp these matters, researchers must develop a theoretical framework for studying state power over land as a process that differentiates between various spheres of governance. This process involves institutionalizing the distinctions between three main problems:

1. The problem of land rent, where land is viewed as the central means of production within a political economy that, theoretically, draws no distinction between state finance and the economy of agricultural society.

2. The problem of land ownership, which concerns the transformation of land into a commodity that can be monopolized and repurposed within a "free economy" that is, theoretically and legally, independent of the problem of state rent.

3. The problem of urbanization, which revolves around the regulation of land use and the production of its economic, social, and political value by integrating it into a comprehensive system of spatial relations.

Methodologically, this study traces various historical phases, highlighting the central issues associated with each, and broadening the possibilities of historical research into the evolution of colonization in Palestine. In doing so, I have relied on a review and reframing of the literature, while offering specific examples drawn from my own research. The basic challenge posed by this method is bringing together issues that appear different – and are generally examined within distinct disciplines and epistemological approaches – into a single framework. These issues include: the Ottoman agricultural economy, which concerns historians; the legal history of ownership, addressed by legal scholars; and issues of urban planning, which engage geographers and planning experts. However challenging, connecting these fields theoretically and historically may enable a more comprehensive analytical perspective on the conflict, one that captures its continuity and shifts over time without reducing it to any single dimension.

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[1] *Tapu* was a permanent lease of state-owned arable land to a peasant family in the Ottoman Empire. The term was also used to refer to the title deed that certified *tapu* rights.

[2] See, for example, "'*al-Kūshān al-ʿUthmānī' ... Qārib Najāt al-Arḍ al-Filasṭīniyya min Amwāj al-Iḥtilāl*," *Reports*, Aljazeera Documentary, 2/12/2023, accessed on 5/11/2024, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQTZ

Miri Land from the Perspective of the State Agricultural Economy in Late Ottoman Times

In the Ottoman context, *miri* land belonged to the State Treasury, or *Bayt al-Māl* (that is, it was ultimately the property of the Muslim nation, or Umma). Thus, the rights of disposal (*ḥuqūq al-taṣaruf*, known in the literature also as usufruct rights) granted to individuals were a mandate from the state. This included most of the agricultural and non-agricultural lands in the state with the exception of residential areas, gardens, agricultural lands under the category of *mulk* (property in the Shariʿa sense) and religious endowments (*awqāf*) of various kinds. According to many historians, the Ottoman understanding of *miri* land rights[3] was based on the principle of multiple rights (or a bundle of rights in the object), that is, the notion that more than one party could hold more than one right to the same land. Such interrelated rights related to rent and produce, and no single right nullified the others. However, during the latter half of the 19th century and after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, complex processes gave rise to the logic of exclusive land ownership by private individuals.[4]

There is an ongoing debate over the features and implications of this shift, centred on how the Land Code of 1858 should be interpreted. Did the Ottoman code recognize private land ownership, or did it not? In a recent article, Atilla Aytekin argues for the importance of reading the Ottoman Land Code as a response by the State to prevailing social conditions, as the customary practices associated with private ownership were undergoing transformation both under Ottoman rule and elsewhere.[5]

According to Aytekin's interpretative strategy, the phrases in the 1858 Code that refer to state ownership of *miri* land, and which are typically seen as undermining the concept of private ownership (such as the law's reference to state officials as those who implement the Code and grant individuals rights of disposal over land) are merely conventional legal formulations, and not the core substance of the law. According to this view, the important aspects of the Code include, for example, its recognition of women's ownership rights, which parallels developments in 19th-century capitalist societies, as well as its acknowledgement of large privately-owned farms as an existing reality, which indicates that private ownership of agricultural land (regardless of technical legal formulations) had become commonplace prior to the Code's promulgation.

It is certainly possible to argue in favour of and contra this theoretical approach, which takes material developments to precede law as the causal relationship between concrete reality and law is not linear – with one always preceding the other – but rather dialectical. The difficulty with Aytekin's method, however, is that his research focuses exclusively on unpacking the text, without extending the analysis to the historical circumstances that are vital to interpreting the text.

In fact, Aytekin's method encounters a genuine difficulty when tested against historical circumstances. When *miri* land is transferred from the state (its ultimate legal owner) to the person holding rights of disposal, the land would revert to the state upon the interruption of actual tenure or payment of the tithes. This indicates that possession of the land was, in essence, conditional upon fulfilling a commitment to the state rather than constituting pure ownership. Is this merely a formal matter with no substantive bearing on the nature of people's rights to land?

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[3] For general definitions of these groups, see Articles 1 to 4 of the Land Code of 1858 in: *Aṣl wa-Tarjamat Qānūn wa-Niẓāmnāmat al-Arāḍī*, Nicola Naqqash (trans.) (Beirut: Matbaʿat al-Abaa al-Yasuʿiyyin, 1873).

[4] I am referring here to perspectives proposed by Roger Owen and Huri Islamoğlu. See: Roger Owen (ed.), *New Perspectives on Property and Land in the Middle East* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University, 2000), p. xi; Huri Islamoğlu, "The Land Code as a Contested Domain: A Reevaluation of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858," in: Owen (ed.), pp. 3-60.

[5] E. Attila Aytekin, "Agrarian Relations, Property and Law: An Analysis of the Land Code of 1858 in the Ottoman Empire," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 45, no. 6 (2009), pp. 935-951.

In subsequent amendments to the 1858 Code, Ottoman law broadened the right of disposal to include transfer of inheritance, *al-farāgh bil-wafā* (that is, transfer of *tapu* rights for the purpose of repaying a debt),[6] insurance contracts, and the like. This suggests that rights of disposal fall somewhere on a continuum between tenure and ownership. Nevertheless, this does not render the term *mahlul* (referring to lands that had not been cultivated for over three years or whose owner had died without leaving heirs) a merely formal designation that gives the appearance of state ownership while tacitly implying private ownership.

The famous cases of the use of the *mahlul* category make this point abundantly clear. While the discussion here focuses on Palestine, its significance extends to the entire Ottoman Empire. After the Egyptian army's withdrawal from Palestine in the early 1840s, it took the Ottoman State more than two decades to restore direct control over its internal frontiers. In Marj Ibn Amer (also known as the Valley of Megiddo) and the inland Aghwar Plains, the state initially relied on the Bedouin strongman Aqil Agha (d. 1866/1867) as a local proxy until the mid-1860s. Thereafter, specialized *tapu* committees were dispatched to survey the lands and declare vast tracts "*mahlul*" on the grounds that they had not been cultivated for over ten years (measured most probably by the tax records). These lands had long served as a source of livelihood for numerous villagers, Bedouins, and Turkmen tribes, as well as for residents of various villages. Overnight, however, they were stripped of their legal possession of the land, which was then made available to a new class of absentee landlords who paid registration fees and taxes to the State and, in return, obtained *tapu* deeds that secured their control over land rent. These absentee owners were later joined by Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918) himself, who became the largest landowner of the era.

In these cases, possession did not entail the expulsion of those residing on the land but, rather, transformed them into farmer-tenants under a sharecropping system, an arrangement that dispossessed them, at best, of two-tenths of their crops; one-tenth was pocketed by the landowner as rent (rental tithe), and another went to the state as the *miri* tax (*miri* tithe). Despite their growing misery, these farmers remained the backbone of the traditional production system, preserving both their social units and their presence on the land. Given the nature of agricultural production, the state's reliance on tithes, and the prevailing agrarian production practices, *tapu* registration did not in practice yet confer on owners an exclusive right to the land, nor did it entail the forcible expulsion of the farmers. In effect, the *tapu* rendered the new landowners as partners in the local production process. Their rights to the land were limited to a fixed share of its rent, not full control over it. Such control began to develop with the expansion of Zionist settlement and the development of its ideology of complete replacement. This type of control over the land did not aim to exploit its pliant and submissive labourers familiar with the land and traditional agriculture, but rather to replace them with members of an ethnic group intended to supplant the country's population and transform its national character. The *tapu* deed began to emerge (and be contested) as a legal right to land emptied of its farmers and former inhabitants.

The process of legal emptying of the land as practiced by the Ottoman state, that is, the act of declaring lands to be *mahlul*, was not the only means by which absentee landowners were empowered. These landowners also benefitted from the development of a cash economy that was tightening its control over the countryside, deepening peasant farmers' indebtedness and their resultant need to take out cash loans to complete the seasonal agricultural cycles essential to their survival. Along with several likeminded merchants, the Beiruti Sursuq (Sursock) family, well known for profiting from Ottoman policies related to *mahlul* lands, extended loans to peasant farmers. This apparently led to further land being relinquished and registered under the *tapu* system in the names of merchants and financiers.

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[6]   *al-Farāgh* is a term used in the Ottoman Land Code, which refers to the act of transferring *tapu* rights of disposal from one person to another. This process is not called a sale, because the latter assumes ownership, a condition that is not met in the strict legal sense in the right to dispose of *miri* land. It is also distinguishable from *al-intiqāl,* which refers to the inheritance of *tapu* rights by relatives as defined in the Code (which does not follow the Shariʿa inheritance law). *al-Farāgh bil-Wafā* refers to the act of transferring *tapu* rights in lieu of debt repayment.

Once again, this did not mean that the peasants would be expelled. It, however, did subject them to an additional land rent, a rental tithe on top of the *miri* tithe. As a result, they continued farming the land according to the *khums* (one-fifth) system. We have little information about these dynamics from a local, micro perspective. Be that as it may, Ottoman law guaranteed, in some cases, the right of the farmer who had relinquished his land to pay a debt owed to a merchant or financier to reclaim his land upon repayment of the debt.[7]

Indeed, there are documented cases in which peasant-farmers resisted the notion that land sales were final, and expected their rights to the land, including their right to reclaim it, to continue in force. This understanding persisted into the 1920s, even after the end of Ottoman rule and the introduction of numerous legal changes by the British Mandate authorities to the existing system of land ownership in Palestine.[8] From the perspective of the farmers, *tapu* registration secured a lender's right to full repayment, but did not entail an exclusive right to the land itself.

It is clear from the foregoing that the Ottoman *tapu* deed was increasingly being interpreted as evidence of an individual's exclusive right of disposal, even if the movement in this direction was not entirely consistent. On the one hand, the law did not identify the rights enjoyed by permanent farmers on the land but simply registered the name of "the owner of the land", indicating that a set of rights had been dropped in favour of a single right. On the other hand, this was probably due to the law's conflation of the obligation to pay rent with the right of disposal (where the latter was derived from the former, implying that the state remained the ultimate owner of the land). Additionally, Ottoman law provided an imprecise record of actual holdings, as it was not implemented through systematic and detailed surveys that captured rights as they were known and exercised by people.

This inconsistency in the understanding of the *tapu* is illustrated by developments surrounding Sultan Abdul-Hamid's own lands. Not long after his accession to the throne in 1876, he outlined a distinctive policy aimed at expanding his imperial estates (*humayun* or *saniyya* lands) through instructions issued by his royal court to the Imperial Tapu Authority. These instructions included registering his name as the owner of the land and noting that it would be transferred to his offspring after him, i.e., treating it as his private property.[9] However, he deliberately conflated property with sovereignty. In 1880, he established a special body called the Imperial Lands Authority under his privy purse to exempt his financial affairs from oversight by the Ministry of Finance and the Council of Ministers – oversight that had begun under his father in 1838 in the beginning of the Tanzimat Era.[10] In other words, Abdul Hamid created a special, sovereign space for himself, using the language of private ownership to reinforce his exceptional status as a monarch who stood apart from his subjects.

Sultan Abdul Hamid's vast land holdings encompassed millions of dunams across the breadth of the Empire, from the vilayets of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul with their oil fields, to Ankara, Edirne, Bursa, and

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[7] See Articles 114 to 117 of the Land Code of 1858 in: *Aṣl wa-Tarjamat Qānūn wa-Niẓāmnāmat al-Arāḍī.*

[8] Munir Fakher Eldin, "Confronting a Colonial Rule of Property: The al-Sakhina Case in Mandate Palestine," *Arab Studies Journal*, vol. xvii, no. 1 (2019), pp. 12-33.

[9] An Armenian Ottoman official, politician, and legal expert, Dr Halagian, was summoned by the British government to testify in a case concerning the Sultan's heirs. Dr Halagian's testimony is preserved in a 17-page document in which he states that the orders Abdul Hamid issued to the Imperial Tapu Authority (*al-Daftar al-Khāqānī*) to transfer his property to his offspring nullified a longstanding Ottoman custom whereby the Sultan's property would be transferred to his successor. not to his offspring (p. 4 of the document). This document, titled, "Heirs of the Sultan Abdul Hamid Pleadings", is housed in a file preserved in the Israeli State Archives under reference number 5100/8-מ. The file can be retrieved at https://search.archives.gov.il using the code "000uore". However, since the beginning of the genocidal war on Gaza in October 2023, the Israeli State Archive website has been blocked to users in Arab countries.

[10] References to this body began to appear in the Ottomans' official annal (*Salname*) in all of these vilayets in the late 1880s, confirming its governmental nature. In other words, the notion of sultanate property and *tapu* registration in the name of Abdul Hamid II did not denote purely private ownership. Rather, it was based on a conceptual conflation between the person of the Sultan and his position as a ruler endowed with broad powers of governance. See, for example, the Salname of the Syria Vilayet 1891/92.

Konya in present-day Turkey; to Thessalonica in Greece; the Ioannina Elayet (in present-day southern Albania and central and northern Greece); Aleppo, Hama, and the entire vilayet of Syria; Jerusalem, Beirut, Cyprus, and Tripoli (Lebanon), as well as the capital city Astana (present-day Istanbul) and its surrounding sanjaks (administrative districts). His holdings also included concessions in numerous mines, ports, and maritime transportation lines throughout various vilayets.[11] When Abdul Hamid was deposed in 1909, the process of dispossessing him of the lands and concessions he had arrogated to himself (through reverting its revenues to the states, hence it became known as *medevera*[12] in Ottoman Turkish, or *mudawwara, in Arabic*) was one of the most complex challenges of the constitutional era, remaining the subject of judicial and political disputes for many years thereafter.[13]

In some respects, Sultan Abdul Hamid acted like any other absentee landlord, imposing on the farmers who worked the land a tax of one-fifth of their produce. However, he would transfer the tithe (*miri*) tax, levied in addition to the rent tithe (*ʿushr al-ijāra*) to his private exchequer. He then used these revenues to integrate the Bedouin, sectarian minorities, and refugees that had fled regions upturned by war with Russia under the banner of the sultanate. As part of this enterprise, he built primary schools and mosques, renovated tombs and shrines, and constructed roads and towns that became symbols of Ottoman sovereignty and modernity in locations such as Beisan, Bir al-Sabaʿ, and ʿAuja al-Hafir along the Egyptian borders.

The funds Sultan Abdul Hamid was collecting from lands registered in his own name were essentially deducted from state revenues. However, they were not necessarily going into his pocket or used for private economic activity by himself or his offspring. Rather, they were deployed to reinforce the classical conception of the sultan as both ruler and symbol of sovereignty. At the same time, he was successfully bypassing the central bureaucracy and its growing restrictions on his personal authority.

In a subsequent phase, after Abdul Hamid's deposing the Unionist governments considered the *medevera* estates as *mahlul* and, in a return to the policy of the 1870s, offered them for sale en masse. However, this move encountered vehement political and popular opposition, particularly in the case of Palestine, where the Zionist threat was becoming increasingly apparent. In fact, the opposition succeeded in blocking the implementation of this policy, thereby maintaining the status quo that had emerged under Abdul Hamid in most of the *medevera* lands, except for the Huleh concession granted by Beirut's Salam clan, which was made in an attempt to undermine the reformists' opposition to the Unionists' coup against the government of Kamil Pasha immediately prior to World War I.[14]

Persevering in their struggle after the onset of the British occupation, particularly in the Ghor Bisan region, the people of Palestine succeeded in thwarting a scheme aimed at enabling the Zionist movement to seize control over a large part of the *medevera* lands. Their efforts compelled the first High Commissioner of Palestine, Herbert Samuel, known for his support for Zionism, to return the land to its rightful indigenous

[11] Naz Yücel, "On Ottoman, British, and Belgian Monarchs' Ownership of Private Property in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Comparison," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 43, no. 2 (1 August 2023), p. 212.

[12] The word *medevera* was a technical bureaucratic term used by the Ottomans to shift properties and revenues from the Sultan's privy purse to the Ministry of Finance. It originated in two imperial edicts issued by Sultan Abdulhamid II and Murad V, 1908 and 1909.

[13] See: Naz Yücel, "Sustaining the Empire: Transformation of Property Regime in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1876–1913," PhD Dissertation, George Washington University, 2023, Part III. In one of the peculiar turns in the history of these territories, Sultan Abdul Hamid's heirs claimed the right to them as a legal inheritance and sued for this right in courts in Palestine and subsequent mandate states, with support from US and British financial corporations established for this purpose. In 1937, they won their case concerning the lands of the village of al-Muharraqa near Gaza City in the Jaffa Court, and hoped that this would set a precedent for future wins in other territories both in Palestine and beyond. However, a series of appeals led to the reversal of the decision, thus affirming the legitimacy of *medevere* measures as a legal and "sovereign act". Palestinian newspapers covered this case with considerable concern and trepidation. See, for example, *al-Difaʿ*, 5/3/1927; *Falastin*, 15/4/1930; *Miraat al-Sharq*, 14/3/1934; *Falastin*, 22/3/1937, 19/5/1937, and 4/1/1946. For a useful study of the subject, see: Ruth Kark & Seth J. Frantzman, "'One of the Most Spectacular Lawsuits Ever Launched': Abdülhamid's Heirs, His Lands and the Land Case in Palestine, 1908-1950," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 42 (2010), pp. 127-157.

[14] Many newspaper articles appeared in Palestine on this topic in the context of the Salam family's decision to relinquish this concession and sell it to a Zionist settlement corporation in 1934. See, for example, Fata al-ʿArab (pseudonym), "Shaykh al-Ḥula Yatanabbaʾ bi-l-Bayʿ Qabl ʿIshrīn Sana: Ḥawl Imtiyāz al-Ḥūla Ayḍan," *Jaridat al-Difaa*, 27/12/1934.

owners. In doing so, the territories' status as ordinary *miri* lands was reaffirmed by disregarding the dates on which they had been registered as personal property under *tapu* title deeds.

In this context, local residents contested the notion that the *tapu* deeds held by the government (in the name of Sultan Abdul Hamid II) constituted conclusive evidence of ownership. Their legal representative was a gentleman named Wadiʿ al-Bustani (1888-1954), a lawyer, poet, and scion of the Lebanese Bustani family, known for its role in the modern Arab Renaissance. Al-Bustani had settled in Palestine during the British Mandate and was involved in several prominent land cases. In contrast to prevailing understandings of the development of capitalist relations and the transformation of the *tapu* system into a mechanism for transferring ownership in the late Ottoman period, al-Bustani submitted an official memorandum to Samuel, saying:

> The fact is that, since before the creation of the *tapu* system [in 1859], proof of legal ownership has consisted of recognized documents such as a certificate of disposal without contest, a writ of sale, a division of inheritance, a waqf decree, a deed of gift, and the like. The *tapu* deed is merely a sign that has been forcibly made into evidence for the existence of such proofs. However, [apart from such proofs], it cannot be considered legal or just. We base this assertion on the fact that the question of ownership to this day, is governed by the articles of the Mecelle,[15] *which determine ownership not solely on the basis of a tapu* deed, but rather according to the aforementioned documents. In other words, the *tapu* deed possesses no greater legality, validity, legitimacy, or fairness than that which underlies it.

When the report was published by the well-known *al-Karmal* newspaper, its owner, Najib Nassar (1865-1948) commented on it, saying:

> The addition [to the tithe taxes] that Abdul Hamid used to collect from farmers in al-Ghor was in return for protection from creditors and government employees. This same approach was adopted by many merchants and influential individuals, who provided small loans to residents of villages owned [by others], sparring them from paying the *werko* tax [a tax added to the tithes]. In return, however, they charged them 23%, a practice that persisted until war was declared.[16]

Eventually, the people of these lands secured a settlement in their favour. Yet with it, they entered a new world in which *tapu* deeds played a critical role in creating a land market that turned against them.

Mandate "Land Settlement": The State Exits the Market, Only to Re-Enter

British Mandate policies on the land were based on the close relationship between state finance and ownership of agricultural land in the Ottoman system, and the nature and function of the *tapu* register. These policies followed two complementary tracks: the first involved replacing the Ottoman *tapu* system with a new registration system and entirely different procedural mechanisms; and the second entailed reforming the tithe system.

1. Replacement of the Ottoman Tapu System with a New Registration System and Entirely Different Procedural Mechanisms

This approach began in 1921 with the *medevera* lands in Beisan, Samakh, and Ghor al-Fariʿah. It was followed in 1928 by passage of the Land (Settlement of Title) Ordinance to register and identify land ownership through cadastral surveys. The ordinance aimed to address land disputes and ensure clearer

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[15] The Journal of Judicial Verdicts (*Majallat al-Aḥkām al-ʿAdliyya*) was a civil law code that had been formulated by a committee of scholars in 1869 CE based on the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence.

[16] Wadiʿ al-Bustani, "Taqrīr al-Difāʿ ʿAn ʾḤuqūq Ahālī al-Ghūr fī Arāḍīhim (3)," *al-Karmal*, 14/9/1921.

land titles throughout Mandatory Palestine. Under this new law, state employees were authorized to enter villages, parcel the land, and assign village residents rights to fixed plots. Given the complexity of the mechanisms involved and their impact on local communities, this process proceeded slowly. It took two decades to settle titles to approximately 20% of Palestine, during which the focus remained on the plains, particularly in areas purchased by Zionist settlements.[17]

In the remaining regions, by contrast, the Mandate relied solely on new tax records as the basis for recognizing tenure. Subsequently, the Jordanian authorities continued to operate on nearly the same bases as the British Mandate. However, the process made no significant changes in the West Bank or in Jerusalem prior to the occupation. Following the 1967 occupation, the occupation authorities reversed the criteria for land claim settlements inside the Green Line, and halted the process entirely in the occupied territories.

With regard to the foundations of the British Mandate land title settlement, at least two developments marked turning points. The first was the decision to introduce new interpretations of the land classifications established in the Ottoman Land Code and the way in which they were recorded. The second was a change in the understanding of the concept of private ownership.

In the first development, the terms "private land" and "state land" were introduced for the first time, with state land registered in the name of the High Commissioner "on behalf of the Government". These terms are absent from the Ottoman system and its Land Code. On the surface, this effort appeared to be a mere translation of Ottoman terminology. In fact, however, it involved a reinterpretation of the underlying concepts. According to this new interpretation, *mawat* lands (uncultivated and unappropriated "dead" land), *matruka* lands (lands left without cultivation or ostensible owner), *mahlul* lands (lands that reverted to the state if left uncultivated for three years or vacated and available for re-grant), and *medevera* lands were all henceforth classified as "state lands" or "government lands", while all *miri* lands with provable tenure were redefined as "private land".

This new categorization eliminated the flexible boundaries that had previously characterized these terms in the Ottoman system. Under the Ottoman Land Code, for example, if someone reclaimed *mawat* land without prior authorization and was not caught or prevented from doing so within three years, he would acquire the right to register the land in their name through a *tapu* deed. In other words, their tenure would become official.[18] This meant that reclaiming *mawat* land was permissible unless the government had a specific reason to prevent this, and provided it acted within three years of the reclamation's initiation.

Under the British Mandate, by contrast, the law required farmers and village mayors to report such cases within three months of their occurrence, and failure to do so was deemed a violation of the law.[19] The same stricture applied to *mahlul* lands. The principle set forth in the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 held that access to land would be granted to new individuals to guarantee the collection of *miri* revenues. There was no concept of registering the land as the property of the state through a *tapu* deed, as land was already considered, by law, to belong to the state. However, broad categories of heirs, partners, associates, and the village poor were granted priority access to the land of a deceased person who had no children or living parents. Only in the absence of individuals from any of these categories would the state authorize others to obtain the land, and this would occur through public auction. Similarly, Ottoman law granted anyone who laid claim to *mahlul* lands a grace period of ten years within which to register the land via a *tapu* title deed, without the state raising any objection.[20]

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[17] Dove Gavish, The Survey of Palestine under the British Mandate, 1920–1948 (London: Routledge Curzon and Palestine Exploration Fund, 2005), p. 180.

[18] See Article 125 of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 in *Aṣl wa-Tarjamat Qānūn wa-Niẓāmnāmat al-Arāḍī*.

[19] See the 1921 Law on Mawat Lands in: Duaybis al-Murr, *Aḥkām al-Arāḍī al-Muttabaʿa fī al-Bilād al-ʿArabiyya al-Munfaṣila ʿan al-Sulṭa al-ʿUthmāniyya* (Jerusalem: Matbaʿat Bayt al-Quds, 1923), p. 150.

[20] See the articles in Chapter Four, particularly Articles 59, 60, and 77 of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 in *Aṣl wa-Tarjamat Qānūn wa-Niẓāmnāmat al-Arāḍī*.

These aspects of the Ottoman concept of *mahlul* were dropped with the advent of the British Mandate. Instead, strict emphasis was placed on the state's exclusive right to *mahlul* land, which would remain in its possession and be registered in its name.[21] In a clear break with Ottoman law and practice, rights of disposal to such land were granted only through temporary lease contracts and long-term concessions.

Regarding the second development, the British found that although Ottoman law did not recognize the system of communal tenancy (*mashāʿ, or mushāʿ*), it had nevertheless been widely tolerated.[22] Hence, it was deemed necessary to promote the notion of the "ideal" landowner: a self-reliant, competitive farmer who is independent vis-à-vis community. This so-called "ideal" was promoted under the pretext that dependence on communal structures impeded "development", and led to the neglect of land. According to the dominant rhetoric of the British Mandate authorities, the application of periodical redistribution of the land discouraged individual investment in land improvement, as any monetary or labour contribution would ultimately benefit others.[23] It was this arrangement, they claimed, that contributed to the deterioration of agricultural productivity and the depletion of the land's resources.[24]

Accordingly, the new land registration system, the mandatory subdivision of land, and the establishment of individual land ownership were presented as necessary measures for "development". These changes were promoted not only as aligning with a supposed natural human inclination toward private ownership, but also as meeting the need to associate exclusive ownership with a clear, robust *tapu* title deed, purportedly to create agricultural loan mechanisms that would liberate farmers from the greed of lenders who exploited their misery and financial woes by charging exorbitant interest rates. Of course, local mechanisms of land subdivision existed and adapted to various economic conditions. But when such subdivision was imposed through relentless state intervention, local practices were forcibly directed onto a different path.

This aspect of Mandate policy has been discussed by several scholars. However, it warrants further research from the perspective of the law and the land settlement process, as well as its impact on the ground.[25]

2. Changing the Tithe System

This change was closely related to the developments discussed above. The British Mandate began by fixing the tithe rates recorded over the previous four years, through new legislation known as the Tithe Amendment Act of 1927. The purpose of this legislation was to stabilize the state's income by shielding it from fluctuations in tithe revenue, and to eliminate taxation practices that were no longer regarded as civilized, such as annual appraisals conduced in haphazard and arbitrary manner, or requiring farmers to leave their harvested grains on the threshing floors until the arrival of a government tax official, causing crops to spoil or lose their market value.

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[21] See the 1921 Law on Mahlul Lands in: al-Murr, pp. 148-149.

[22] Justice Tute, "The Law of State Lands in Palestine," *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1927), pp. 173, 177-178.

[23] The *mushāʿ* system was applied on a broad scale in Ottoman Palestine and in the Mashreq generally. The system was based on a periodic redistribution of land based on an annual or bi-annual lottery among the families of a village, or among the members of a single family or clan. It helped to preserve social cohesion within the village and/or clan, particularly given the pressures being exerted by the emerging cash economy and the new registration systems being introduced by successive governments.

[24] The Mandate Government archive available to researchers contains numerous files relating to "land reclamation", which scholars have treated as authoritative sources of information. However, we have yet to see critical analytical studies that discuss the structure of the discourse on this topic and reveal its numerous presuppositions and arguments. For more examples of the discussions of joint tenure lands, tithes, and the logic behind the change sought by the Mandate, see the Israeli State Archive file titled, "Land Settlement (General Points) and Sir Ernest Dowson's Reports", (No. 5285/3-מ), at https://search.archives.gov.il, using the code 000btvm, and the file titled, "E. Dowson Visits – Memoranda and Proposals for Settlement, Registration, and Taxation of Land", at https://search.archives.gov.il, using the code 000bhkd.

[25] Scott Atran, "Hamula Organisation and Masha'a Tenure in Palestine," *Man*, vol. 21, no. 2 (June 1986), pp. 271-295; Nadan Amos, *The Palestinian Peasant Economy Under the Mandate: A Story of Colonial Bungling* (Cambridge Mass: Distributed for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University by Harvard University Press, 2006).

However, finding that these measures did not go far enough, the Mandate authorities sought to change the theoretical foundation of their taxation policy. Thus, in the early 1930s, the entire tithe system was abolished and replaced with a "land tax" system, which was based on surveying existing agricultural plots and recording taxpayers' names (though without addressing questions of ownership, which remained the responsibility of the other track: the land settlement process and precise survey). The surveyed plots were then classified into different tax categories that reflected the soil quality, the irrigation methods, and such objective characteristics of the land.

British colonial officials, such as district governors and directors of relevant government departments in the High Commissioner's office, engaged in lengthy debates over the feasibility of this change. Some, particularly district governors who dealt directly with the people, held that the benefit to be gained from the new system would be too negligible to justify the tremendous effort required for its implementation. If the authorities' aim was simply to collect a fixed tax for the state, then the amended tithe system already served the purpose. Moreover, they argued that the tithes were more practical and convenient for the government, as they were familiar to and acceptable by the people.

The prevailing view, however, assailed the very philosophy behind the tithes. For proponents of this view, the importance of the land tax lay not merely in securing funds for the government, but in changing the culture of governance and reshaping people's expectations of the state. Under the tithe system, the state and the farmer functioned as partners in production. Consequently, the state shared with the farmer in both profits and losses. But within the emerging logic of free economic competition, this meant that the state would be rewarding lazy farmers and punishing the industrious ones. Every farmer understood that more effort would result in having to share the fruits with a "sleeping partner", namely, the state, which reduced the motivation to develop and advance.

The discussion went further, in fact, by linking land's productive value to the objective characteristics of the land, rather than to the given social patterns of production. This meant that a farmer unable to extract this value from the land should be compelled economically to relinquish it to someone who could.[26] Structurally, these philosophical interpretations – centred on the virtues of ownership and the competitive economy – pointed to the need to separate state finance from the agricultural economy and to liberate the latter from the restrictions of the former. From this perspective, guaranteeing a fixed income for the state was only one side of the coin; the other was the promotion of economic competition and the facilitation of land monopolization.

Through its handling of these issues, the British Mandate advanced a new discourse around the right to land, one that privileged the Zionist settlers as an ethnic group. If the value of land was inherent to the land itself rather than a result of the conventional pattern of production sustained by the state itself, then the land's "true" owner was not necessarily the person currently possessing it, but rather the one capable of developing it. It is not a far leap from this assertion to the notion that a particular ethnic group, embodied by Western Zionist settlers with advanced material, scientific, and organizational resources (what Patrick Wolfe terms "settlement capital"), could be viewed as the "true" owners of the land. In practical terms, this economic rationale – rather than solely a theological claim – was reflected in the privileges extended to Zionist settlers in areas such as al-Huleh, Bassat Qisariya, as well as in projects like the Dead Sea Concession and the Rutenberg Electricity Concession.[27]

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26 "Land Settlement (General Points) and Sir Ernest Dowson's Reports;" "E Dowson Visits – Memoranda and Proposals for Settlement, Registration, and Taxation of Land."

27 For a classic study of British economic policy, see: Barbara Smith, *The Roots of Separatism in Palestine: British Economic Policy, 1920-1929* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993); and for a critical reading of the British "development rhetoric" in Palestine, see: Zeina Ghandour, *A Discourse on Domination in Mandate Palestine: Imperialism, Property, and Insurgency* (London: Routledge, 2010).

The impact of these transformations was not unidirectional. The process of settling land rights under the British Mandate was based on a broad principle: the registration of rights based on local conventions. Plots of land were distributed among village residents without reference to an Ottoman *tapu* title deed unless one already existed. In other words, the process affirmed Palestinian ownership practices to a significant extent. Jointly owned property and *matruka* lands in Arab villages – often reclassified as state lands – were plundered. Excess lands were gradually encroached upon and Palestinian villagers were compressed into smaller areas. Public lands were instead allocated for Zionist settlement (which Palestinians resisted in numerous ways). Yet it is important not overlook the significance of this broad principle. Nor should there be an overgeneralization by claiming that the ownership system favoured the settlers.[28] Similarly, with respect to the enforcement of the land tax and its assessment according to the new tax brackets, the willingness of the people to accept new procedures remained a key criterion in determining whether to adopt them.[29]

Two additional observations are in order regarding the dialectic involved in these changes and their impact on Palestinian land tenure. First, it should be noted that the large sales that occurred in the 1920s in Marj Ibn Amer and other plains regions were undertaken by Lebanese and Syrian absentee landowners who had gained control over the land through the legal and economic conditions that prevailed during the late Ottoman era, including Ottoman *mahlul* policies. Thus, the indirect condition for these sales was rooted in Ottoman policies, while the British Mandate's land settlement process did not necessarily play a role in facilitating them. It is true, of course, that Mandate policies pertaining to land settlement opened the door for settlers' capital in new regions where the land was owned by Palestinian peasants whose holdings had not previously formed part of the Ottoman real estate market. At the same time, however, the nature of land settlement in these regions slowed the pace of Zionist settlement expansion and led to geographic patterns that were not amenable to the logic of contiguous territorial control and the complete replacement of the indigenous population.

In particular, regions such as Bisan, where the effects of land-rights settlements and market dynamics can be clearly traced, some farmers sold shares that overlapped with those of family members or fellow villagers, or shares that had not yet been divided into individual plots. This practice prevented Zionist settlers from achieving complete control over the land.[30] In our view, the limited nature of the Palestinian land market and the British Mandate's approach to managing it remained understudied, and must be revisited for a better understanding of the evolution and dynamics of the confrontation between Zionist settlement and Palestinian society within the framework of the British Mandate.

The second observation concerns the use of land ownership within the Mandate's political and colonial demography. Alongside the rhetoric of private property, the British were obliged in the early 1930s to develop a parallel rhetoric affirming farmers' rights and to enact laws designed to protect these rights. This development followed the Buraq Uprising of 1929, after which the Mandate authorities drew a connection between the uprising and the mass expulsions of Arab farmers from areas of Zionist settlement in Marj Ibn Amer.[31] In response, legislation was introduced prohibiting the eviction of any farmer who had farmed a given piece of land for two seasons (ten months) and had paid the requisite rent to the landowner. These

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[28] For an important micro-level study of land rights settlements and the ways in which Palestinians lost parts of their lands in some Arab villages as compared with the Zionist settlements, see: Aida Asim Essaid, *Zionism and Land Tenure in Mandate Palestine* (Abingdon Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

[29] This situation is reflected in a report submitted by Sir Ernest Dowson, a prominent planner of the Mandate authorities' lands-rights settlement and tax policies in Palestine, on the progress that was being made in "land reforms" during the 1920s; see the Israeli State Archive, File 5285/3-מ: Ernest Dowson to High Commissioner, "Progress in Land Reforms, 1923-1930," November 1930, in: "Land Settlement (General Points) and Sir Ernest Dowson's Reports."

[30] In this context, see the case of the village of al-Sakhina, which I discussed in a previous article: Fakher Eldin, "Confronting a Colonial Rule of Property," pp. 12-33.

[31] See the report submitted by the Shaw Commission in 1930: Sir Walter Shaw (Chairman) et al., *Report of the Commission on the Palestine Disturbances of August 1929. Presented by the Secretary of the Colonies to Parliament by Command of His Majesty, March 1930* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1930).

laws, however, had contradictory effects: in some cases, they were used to evict farmers, while in others, they helped farmers to remain on the land and hinder Zionist settlement.[32]

This legal sphere that had not existed under Ottoman rule became an important structural feature in the transition from a tenure system centred on rent to one centred on ownership as the basis for land resource management in a colonial context. This transition was linked to the political and colonial management of Palestine under British rule, particularly to the framing of Palestine as a dual-ethnic entity structured around a hierarchy of collective rights that privileged the colonizers over the indigenous population. It was also linked to the regulation of demographic balances, which required ongoing government intervention.

In the 1920s, the British spoke of linking Jewish immigration to Palestine's "absorptive capacity", by which they meant the capacity of the Palestinian economy to absorb immigrants as workers. The intention was to frame the sphere of absorption not as land, but the labour market. However, this framing proved unsustainable given the Palestinian resistance to Zionist policy to displace Palestinian farmers from the colonized lands. By the 1930's, "absorptive capacity" had become associated with mounting pressure on land resources and the expulsion of Arab farmers at the level of the country at large. This was followed by government deliberations on the need to develop Arab agriculture and the state's responsibility to "resettle" farmers who had been expelled from their land due to Zionist settlement. The amendments made to British policy based on this reframing of the problem, however, failed to resolve the conflict.

After the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt, a new discussion emerged around the need to protect "Arab land". In 1939 the British issued a White Paper with a new vision for shared Arab-Jewish governance in Palestine. The vision had a concrete demographic and geographic aspects. It sought to produce a calculated and controlled demographic balance between the two populations of 60% Arabs and 40% Jews. Land was seen as vital to control this political demography. Thus, new Land Transfer Regulations were issued in 1940 designating up to 75% of Palestine as "Arab land", whereas transfer of land from Arabs to Jews was forbidden. In the remaining areas that were deemed vital for Zionist settlement expansion and economic control, free or conditional transfers subject to the approval of the High Commissioner were permitted.[33]

In view of their overall historical impact, these policies can be understood as part of a scheme to perpetuate the logic of Zionist settler sovereignty, one in which the land market and rights of ownership functioned as tools for shaping the country's geographical, demographic, and political landscape. Land purchases by Zionist settlers were legitimized as conferring the right to expel residents on an ethno-national basis.

From Rent Management and Market Mechanisms to Uprooting and Comprehensive Planning

With the Zionist movement's organizational and political maturation following the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, and the beginning of what is known in Zionist history as the "Second Aliyah" (1904-1914), two ideas crystallized that would play a critical role in shaping the Zionist project. The first was the concept of "Hebrew labour", and the second was the idea of the geographical continuity of Zionist settlement, along with the need to reinforce regional domination to imbue Zionist settlement with a national character in Palestine. During this period, a plan emerged to concentrate settlement in the shape of the letter "N" on the map of Palestine, stretching along the coastal plain from Gaza to Haifa in

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[32] Fakher Eldin, "Confronting a Colonial Rule of Property."

[33] For a previous treatment of this topic, see: Munir Fakher Eldin, "al-Arḍ wa-Huqūq al-Milkiyya wa-l-Irjāʾ al-Istiʿmārī: Bayn Waʿd Balfūr wa-l-Nakba," *Ostour*, vol. 4, no 8 (July 2018), pp. 193-209.

the north, then moving southeast toward the Jordan Valley, and from there northward to the Huleh Plain and the headwaters of the Jordan River in the Upper Galilee.

In this regional thinking, we can discern the harbingers of Zionist settlers' spatial planning. However, their primary tool was not pure spatial planning, but rather the monopolization of land through the market. This reveals a deeper structural issue: the power of property and the roles played by both the Ottoman and Mandate authorities. Alongside the right of possession (or tenure), Zionist settlers obtained a tacit right to engage in urban development, that is, the right to construct settlements and establish a civil life of their own. These developments did not emerge from the framework of spatial governance or urban planning, but were instead rooted in land laws and the dynamics of tenure and ownership.

Following its establishment in 1909 near the ancient port city of Jaffa, the colony of Tel Aviv gradually expanded until it was merged with Jaffa in 1950, effectively absorbing the city. This expansion began with the legal possession of Karm al-Jabali, a vineyard owned by the Jabali family in northern Jaffa. The vineyard was *miri* land that had been sold in 1905 by members of the Jabali family to Jewish brokers living in Jerusalem. These brokers then sold it to a group of German Jewish settlers in Jaffa who dreamed of establishing a modern neighbourhood of their own. To circumvent the legal barrier posed by Ottoman law, which forbade the registration of *miri* land in the name of non-Ottoman Jews, the settlers arranged for two Jaffan Jews, both Ottoman subjects, to register the plots in their names, in return for a residential plot each in the new neighbourhood. To thwart this plan, the Ottoman authorities invoked a 1907 directive that prohibited the registration of *miri* land in the names of Jews, even if they were Ottoman subjects. However, this official opposition collapsed under pressure from foreign consuls, and by 1909, construction of the neighbourhood had commenced. When a number of Bedouin residents filed a legal case against the settlers' construction, claiming prior use of the land through growing vegetables and grains, their claims were rejected by the Ottoman authorities.[34]

This story carries many implications. What concerns us here, however, is that the debate centred on the right to build – an issue understood to hinge on whether or not the party in question held a legal right of tenure. In practical terms, the issue of legal tenure served as a tool employed by the Ottoman authorities to carry out organizational and demographic-political interventions. This supports the broader argument that, during that era, there was no clear distinction between the realms of rent, ownership, and urban development.

This may also apply, to some extent, to the Mandate era. Despite advancements in the field of urban planning, the field remained part of "land law". Moses Doukhan and Frederic Goadby, both officials in the Mandate government, wrote a reference work titled *The Land Law of Palestine*, in which they devoted a chapter to "city planning". There, they proposed that, in light of the urban expansion of villages and towns, *miri* lands should not be turned into *mulk* (privately owned) lands, out of concern that this might lead to the expansion of waqf holdings.[35] Once again, we find that, despite the development of laws particularly addressing urban planning, building permits, and structural maps, the concept of tenure (*al-ḥiyāza*) continued to serve as an indirect instrument of urban organization and spatial governance.

Urban governance as a separate realm regulating spatial relations and land distribution emerged only after the Nakba, with the approval of the Israel's first structural map in 1951. Marking a clear break from the Ottoman and Mandate eras, the issue of rent ceased to be a serious or central concern for the state, and was entirely dissociated from the broader land problem. The domain of ownership was radically restructured to produce "empty land" – that is, land devoid of any Palestinian presence, whether physical or legal – while

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[34] Mark LeVine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 64-67.

[35] Moses Doukhan & Frederic Goadby, *The Land Law of Palestine* (Tel Aviv: Shoshany's Printing, 1936), p. 36.

the state's claim to ownership was expanded and reinforced as the collective property of Zionist settlers. This process required the development of space governance as a distinct field.

1. Property Governance, or "Occupier's Law"

While the British Mandate settled land claims by affirming Palestinian farmers' possession of land based on proof of actual or legal tenure, "Occupier's Law", to borrow and expand Raja Shehadeh's term, developed a range of laws, military and administrative orders, and direct punitive practices aimed at dispossessing Palestinians, whether through legal procedures or by the use of naked force.[36]

The mechanisms employed by "Occupier's Law" – understood broadly as a legal, administrative, and military structure designed to facilitate Palestinian dispossession – can be categorized into four groups:

a. Legal Guardianship over the Properties of Palestinian Refugees

Israeli law classified the property of Palestinian refugees as "absentee property", facilitating the application of this designation even to lands still inhabited by their owners. These properties were transferred to a new authority known as the Guardian of Absentees Property, an official body legally authorized by the state to manage and dispose of such properties without consulting anyone. This so-called guardianship constituted the largest direct seizure of Palestinian property since the beginning of Zionist settlement in the 1880s. Through this mechanism, the State of Israel has transferred vast amounts of land and real estate to various settlement bodies (in particular, the Jewish National Fund and the Development Authority), and continues to do so in occupied Jerusalem, across the West Bank (particularly in Area C), and the occupied Golan Heights.[37]

b. Confiscation on the Pretext of "The Public Interest"

Israeli law grants the government near-absolute authority to confiscate Palestinian land under the pretext of serving "the public interest", without requiring justification or a clear definition of what constitute this interest. This tool of dispossession has had a profound impact on specific regions, most notably the Galilee. In 1976, the confiscation of thousands of dunams of agricultural land from the residents of Arraba, Sakhnin, and Kafr Kanna – part of a scheme to Judaize the Galilee – sparked violent confrontations, resulting in the martyrdom of six Palestinians. These events are commemorated annually on Land Day, observed on 30 March.

c. Kafkaesque Bureaucratic, Judicial, and Legislative Manoeuvres

Examples of such manoeuvres include the bureaucratic practices employed by successive Israeli governments with the explicit aim of obstructing or preventing Palestinians from registering property they rightfully own. This approach has been used extensively in the Negev, where – at the suggestion of Joseph Weitz, a member of the Jewish National Fund's board of directors in the 1950s and a theorist of population transfer – the Land Registration Department was closed. As a result, hundreds of court cases filed by Palestinians remained unresolved for decades, fostering a sense of hopelessness that led many people to abandon their cases and relinquish their rights. Drawing on the views of Zionist researchers shaped by Orientalist thought, the Israeli judiciary advanced the notion that the Negev had been classified as *mawat* land under Ottoman law. This position became the dominant legal interpretation on which courts relied on to dismiss Palestinians land claims, denying their rights and creating a Sisyphean challenge par excellence.[38]

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[36] Raja Shehadeh, *Occupier's Law: Israel and the West Bank* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1985).

[37] See: Malaka Abd al-Latif, "al-Istiyṭān al-Ṣahyūnī al-Dīnī fī al-Quds: Jamʿiyyat Ilʿād ka-Ḥālat Dirāsa," Master Thesis, Birzeit University, 2024.

[38] For an in-depth study of the policy of dispossession and Judaization in its legal dimensions, see: Ahmad Amara, Alexandre Kedar & Oren Yiftachel, *al-Arāḍī al-Mufragha: Jughrāfiyya Qānūniyya li-Ḥuqūq al-Badū fī al-Naqab* (Ramallah: Madar – al-Markaz al-Filastini li-l-Dirasat al-Israiliyya, 2021).

To this can be added settlement outposts, scores of which have proliferated across the West Bank since the 1993 Oslo Accords. These outposts began springing up on hills belonging to Palestinian villages and individuals, planted by Zionist settlers without military orders or explicit coordination with the occupation army. Settlers would install mobile homes, build fences, and connect the outposts to electricity grids and water infrastructure under military protection, thus creating a *fait accompli*.

In Israeli discourse, these outposts are referred to as "illegal settlements", a term that merits clarification, as it conveys two meanings. First, the label "illegal" indicates that these colonies were not formally legitimized by military orders. Second, it reflects the fact that that the land in question had not yet been officially designated as "state lands" by the occupation authorities. As a result, they violated the Israeli High Court's 1979 Elon Moreh decision, which explicitly prohibited the confiscation of private Palestinian land for the purpose of establishing Zionist settlements, while simultaneously allowing settlement on designated "state lands". Following that ruling, a wave of military orders rapidly expanded the classification of lands as "state lands", effectively tripling the area eligible for settlement.[39]

Beginning with the Oslo Accords, these outposts represented a kind of settlement creep beyond the regions declared "state lands". By the logic of settler colonialism, their illegality (under Israeli law, that is, bearing in mind that *all* Jewish settlement in the occupied Palestinian territories is illegal under international law) was not viewed as illegitimate violence. Nevertheless, it gave rise to practical challenges related to real estate value and urban development. Being located outside the legal boundaries of "state lands" limited their marketability and disqualified them from eligibility for housing loans or inclusion in government-subsidized housing projects.

In response to these obstacles, colonial lawmakers devised a clever artifice to facilitate further dispossession of Palestinian land. In 2017, the Knesset passed the Judea and Samaria Settlement Regulation Law, whose explicit purpose was to retroactively legalize settlements built on land privately owned – whether in full or in part – by Palestinians. Under this law, usage rights to such land could be expropriated, while leaving legal ownership status intact. The usage rights would then be transferred to the Custodian of Absentee and Abandoned Property, an agency that forms part of the occupation army's civil administration in the West Bank.

d. Unmasked Force Followed by the Legalization of Its Outcomes

The developments discussed thus far underscore the naked force underpinning the laws and actions of the occupier. A further example is the construction of the apartheid wall, which has imposed severe restrictions on many Palestinian villagers, requiring them to obtain daily security permits merely to reach their lands and perform seasonal agricultural work. In such situations, the path from restrictions to complete dispossession is exceedingly short, as the existing balance of power swiftly tilts against the Palestinians. Simply approaching the barbed wire surrounding a settlement colony can place a Palestinian's life at risk, and their land may be lost without settlers having to undertake any official action. The logic of "security" has thus created legal grey areas in which Palestinian rights – no matter how well documented or firmly established – are effectively erased.[40]

One of the more recent manifestations of unmasked violence in the West Bank is the phenomenon now referred to as "pastoral settlement", wherein Zionist settlers, accompanied and supported by the occupation army, bring their livestock to graze on lands attached to Palestinian villages as a means of taking possession

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[39] For a report by the Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem, see: Nir Shalev, "Under the Guise of Legality: Israel's Declarations of State Land in the West Bank, B'Tselem," February 2012, accessed on 20/2/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQFo. The Committee to Resist the Wall and Settlement, which keeps abreast of confiscation policies and land theft, periodically issues relevant reports and maps; see: https://acr.ps/1L9zQGQ

[40] See: Qusay al-Barghuthi, "Qānūn fī Khidmat al-Istiʿmār: Āliyāt al-Sayṭara al-Istiʿmāriyya al-Istīṭāniyya al-Isrāʾīliyya ʿalā al-Arāḍī al-Filasṭīniyya al-Muḥtalla - al-Diffa al-Gharbiyya (1967 ilā al-Ān) ka-Ḥāla Dirāsiyya," Master Thesis, Birzeit University, 2021.

of the land. The most extreme and brutal expression of Israel's use of such force, however, is currently unfurling in the daily massacres carried out by the occupation army in its genocidal war on the Gaza Strip, accompanied by frantic endeavours to revive Zionist settlement in the devastated northern part of the Strip. In this context, the idea of settlers' occupation precedes theft and actual settlement, all advancing in tandem with the process of colonial urbanism (or what Mr Trump had phrased as the "Riviera of the Middle East").

Through the wide lens of history, settler land control can be seen as having destroyed the land market in which it was born to liberate itself from the political limitations. This process of dispossession, however, did not alone suffice the colonial project. It rather needed to differentiate urbanization as a distinct governmental sphere and to mobilize to its service.

2. The Sphere of Urban Governance

Israel's first structural map, approved in 1951, launched the ideology and methodology of centralized Israeli planning that would dominate over the next four decades, until the late 1980s. The planning philosophy of the period following the ethnic cleansing and seizure of Palestinian refugees' property in 1948 promoted the dispersal of Jewish settlement over the widest possible area through the establishment of the greatest possible number of small colonies. This approach was fuelled by the Zionists imperative to settle Jews both in the areas from which Palestinians had been expelled and along the borders with neighbouring Arab countries. It also sought to delineate the internal boundaries of the Zionist project, that is, the contours of the ethnic hierarchy between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews. The expansion of settlement played a role in banishing Jewish Arab immigrants to the borderlands and creating the so-called development towns, which are residential areas lacking agricultural land and designed to supply cheap labour to Ashkenazi-dominated agricultural settlements.[41]

Spatial planning within the 1948 borders underwent a major shift in the early 1990s, opening the way for a new philosophy oriented toward maximizing the economic exploitation of space and envisioning an urban future composed of major metropolises in the Galilee, the Tel Aviv area, Jerusalem, and Beʾer Sheva. The purpose of this shift was to preserve the intervening green spaces and resources for future (Jewish) generations. This shift was shaped by the development of academic fields related to planning and organization, the emerging power and autonomy of civil societies amid the liberalizing shifts that characterized Israel in the 1980s and 1990s, and the large wave of Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union during that period. Together, these shifts spurred widespread debate over state policy and questions of justice in spatial planning, particularly given the role and impact of NGOs in policy formation.[42]

Two fundamental problems must be highlighted. The first concerns the way in which Israeli spatial planning has functioned to besiege and isolate the Palestinian presence within the Green Line. Numerous reports and studies have revealed a broad range of challenges facing Arab villages and towns, including unrecognized communities and villages repeatedly demolished (particularly in the Negev), the lack of structural maps due to Israeli institutional obstruction, and the incompatibility of Israeli planning criteria with the realities of Arab towns. These conditions have led a growing number of cases in which people build without permits, thus exposing themselves to the risk of demolitions and exorbitant fines.

Demolition of tents, buildings, and facilities, forced displacement, and the absence of appropriate structural plans in both East Jerusalem and the Negev form part of a broader, carefully engineered structural schemes to Judaize the landscape. One notable example is the 2011 Prawer-Begin Plan, which proposed

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[41] For an important reference on this topic, see: Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

[42] For an overall narrative of the history of Israeli spatial planning and its problems, see: Rasim Khamayisi, "al-Arḍ wa-l-Takhṭīṭ wa-l-ʿUmrān," in: Munir Fakher Eldin et al (eds.), *Dalīl Isrāʾīl 2020* (Beirut: Ramallah: Muʾassasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniya, 2021).

the forcible relocation of Bedouins to clear the way for Zionist settlements. This initiative reflected the principles of Israel's new planning doctrine which – like its predecessor – prioritized the expansion of Jewish settlement, for instance by recognizing individually initiated settlements in the Negev and providing them with infrastructure.[43]

The second problem pertains to the geopolitical boundaries of the sphere of urban governance. Officially, the Israeli Planning Administration (IPA) operates within the 1967 borders, with the exception of occupied East Jerusalem and its environs, as well as the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, where Israeli law has been applied and which are thus subject to Israeli structural planning. Yet the urban sphere extends beyond this. Behind the official façade of the IPA's work lies what Rasim Khamayisi has termed "hidden planning", which manifests itself through the constant expansion of Israeli settlements and their urban formations. This includes a vast network of roads and other installations that fragment Palestinian territories, disregarding the Palestinians' presence entirely, and robbing them of any possibility of their own national spatial planning.[44] The "empty land" policy (or Palestinian dispossession) is closely intertwined with a highly effective military-civilian control over the urban space which poses a genuine strategic danger to the Palestinian presence.

A substantial body of research has addressed urbanization in Palestinian cities, particularly the challenges posed by neoliberal policies that have shaped housing initiatives since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the early 1990s. However, relatively less interest has been devoted to the PA's policy regarding land settlement procedures and issuance of *tapu* deeds to citizens. Despite the importance of researching such issues (particularly the PA's role in managing ownership and space), the major problem lies in the PA's limited sovereignty, which remains truncated and confined to only one-third of the area of the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. According to the interim Oslo Accords, the PA only exercises control over Areas A and B, which are effectively a series of disconnected and fragmented enclaves surrounded by Area C, comprising roughly two-thirds of the West Bank, and remains under full Israeli control.[45] Furthermore, the PA's partial jurisdiction does not extend to occupied East Jerusalem. Under these conditions, the PA is structurally incapacitated: it cannot build a road between two villages, let alone develop structural plans that accommodate the evolving needs of Palestinian communities, without encountering the constraints imposed by the Israeli occupation.

Conclusion

A proper historical examination of the conflict over land in Palestine requires a thorough inquiry into the underlying infrastructure of power and control. This study has traced the historical process of differentiation among three spheres of land governance: rent, ownership, and urbanization. By foregrounding this tripartite distinction, the study has revealed the frameworks of control, the central fault lines of the land struggle, and the larger problems experienced by the Palestinians.

The system of private ownership under Ottoman rule emerged as rent lost its central importance. Nevertheless, the new system retained significant vestiges of the earlier rentier system. Recognizing this layered continuity is essential for understanding the language associated with land conflicts during that period, particularly the struggle for Palestine.

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[43] For an overview of these reports, see: Munir Fakher Eldin, "al-Filasṭīniyūn fī Maṣāʾid al-Takhṭīṭ al-ʿUmrānī al-Isrāʾīlī," in: Jamil Hilal, Munir Fakher Eldin & Khalid Farraj (eds.), *Murājaʿat al-Siyāsāt al-Isrāʾiliyya Tijāh al-Qaḍiyya al-Filasṭīniyya* (Beirut/Ramallah: Muʾassasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 2017).

[44] Khamayisi, pp. 792-793.

[45] It must be noted that the Oslo Accords envisioned an interim period of five years during which final status negotiations would be concluded, which never happened, thus turning the interim period and its arrangements into a protracted fact on the ground.

The British Mandate authorities pursued a deliberate effort to restructure the relationship between rent and ownership, transforming the settlement of land claims, that is, the precise legal division of properties, into a basis for rent management rather than its outcome. Although this process was not completed systematically across all of Mandate Palestine, it left significant footprints by introducing contradictions and a frequency of conflicts that had been uncommon under Ottoman rule. Rather than advancing a universal discourse of ownership, the British Mandate reinforced the logic of settler colonialism. This outcome is inseparable from Britain's political commitment to the Zionist project, most notably articulated in the 1917 Balfour Declaration. The study argued that critically examining contradictions of the British Mandate is necessary for understanding Palestinians' daily experiences and the most profound rupture in Palestinian history: the 1948 Nakba.

In contrast to British Mandate policy on property governance, Israel has not simply subjected Palestinian property to the logic of the market and the rhetoric of "development". Rather, it has grounded its approach on the principle of dispossession by all possible means, both legal and administrative. In the sphere of urban governance, the Israeli state sought to spread Jewish settlement and impose ever stricter control over Palestinian space. In many cases, the Palestinian tragedy today can best be understood by examining the logic embedded in Israeli structural planning, which necessitates a critical inquiry into the intersection between legal mechanisms of property theft and the spatial strategies deployed to besiege and fragment Palestinian collective presence on the land.

Failing to distinguish between the various spheres of the conflict or to recognize its historical shifts, from rent to ownership and from ownership to space, leads to projecting current understandings onto the past and impedes clear examinations of historical trajectories that have shaped present realities.

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Araa Al Jaramani*

Protecting the Syrian Family: Community Reconstruction and the Unseen Consequences of War**

نقد مؤسسات الإعمار المجتمعي ومنظماته: العواقب غير المرئية للحرب، الأسرة السورية نموذجًا

Abstract: Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, international and local organizations have played an active role in responding to civilians' needs. However, their activities have largely ignored the importance of safeguarding the Syrian family system. This study demonstrates how these organizations have disregarded the impact of the protracted war on new family dynamics, particularly the shifting gender roles and the evolving approaches to child-rearing during wartime. Compounding this oversight is the fact that international organizations dominate humanitarian efforts in Syria, often operating according to their own agendas. This raises critical questions about the extent to which these organizations understand the Syria's diverse family and societal contexts, and whether they recognize the importance of supporting the Syrian family structure.

Keywords: Syria; Gender; Family System; Post-Conflict Society; International Organizations.

الملخص: منذ اندلاع الثورة في سورية في عام 2011، نشطت المنظمات الدولية والمحلية في الاستجابة لاحتياجات المدنيين، لكنّ أنشطتها تجاهلت في معظمها ما يستوجبه الحفاظ على دينامية منظومة الأسرة السورية. كشفت الدراسة عن تجاهل المنظمات لأثر الحرب وطول سنواتها في الديناميكيات الجديدة المؤثرة في هذه المنظومة، وبخاصة التحول في أدوار الرجال والنساء التقليدية وفي تنشئة الأطفال. وفي هذا الوضع، ومع تصدّر المنظمات الدولية مشهد العمل الإنساني في سورية، وتحركها وفق أجنداتها الخاصة، برز السؤال عن مدى استيعابها للسياقات الأسرية والمجتمعية المتنوعة في سورية، ومدى إدراكها أهمية الاشتغال بدعم منظومة الأسرة السورية.

كلمات مفتاحية: سورية؛ الجندر؛ منظومة الأسرة؛ مجتمع ما بعد الصراع؛ المنظمات الدولية.

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Introduction

The war in Syria has brought about profound changes to the structure of the Syrian family. It has resulted in the loss of the primary breadwinner for nearly 200,000 families and the displacement of approximately 6.8 million people within Syria, in addition to 5.5 million who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries and beyond. These transformations, compounded by harsh economic conditions, have led to the weakening and, in some cases, disintegration of family ties, with the share of female-headed households rising to 22% and child labour rates exceeding 80% in some areas.[1]

In this context, international organizations operating in Syria have undertaken extensive humanitarian interventions. However, their effectiveness in supporting families and their alignment with Syrian cultural and social specificities remain highly debateable. Many of these organizations have continued to focus on emergency aid, without adequately addressing the need to restore family structures and equip them to meet ongoing challenges.[2] This necessitates the reshaping of family relationships and structures to capitalize on positive traditional values and transform the experiences of war into opportunities for constructive change. It also calls for Arab actors to adopt a more systematic approach to the production of knowledge that can inform the development of effective policies to support the family system in societies affected by war and disaster.

When demonstrations broke out in Syria in March 2011, many Syrians believed that positive political change was on the horizon – change that could pave the way for future generations to live in a state free of corruption, where equal opportunity would be available to all.[3] However, the protracted conflict and its evolution into a proxy war forced Syrian families to make difficult and often painful choices. From the outset, political divisions emerged, even within families, pitting regime loyalists against opposition supporters. Such rifts quickly entangled with moral judgments and the delegitimization of opposing views. Negative phenomena also surfaced, such as regime loyalists deeming it acceptable to report their own family members to the intelligence agencies for expressing support for the opposition, or to denounce neighbours or friends who had participated in demonstrations.[4]

The escalation of violence in areas that supported the revolutionary movement led to mass displacement, as large numbers of their residents were forced to seek refuge in regions not subject to regime bombardment. These dynamics of displacement have decisively reshaped the social and economic landscape, particularly through the emergence of relief groups, which gradually evolved into more organized humanitarian organizations. As protests spread across Syria, a new form of civil society activism emerged in the form of coordination committees,[5] which played a pivotal role in organizing and sustaining the popular movement.

These committees facilitated the movement of protesters by identifying safe routes for demonstrations to avoid sniper fire and issuing warnings about the movements of security forces. They also documented areas targeted by bombardment, recording the number of dead, detained, and missing persons. Over time, this activity, which had begun online and through social media, evolved into a more organized

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[1] S. Devadas, I. Elbadawi & N. V. Loayza, "Growth in Syria: Losses from the War and Potential Recovery in the Aftermath," *Middle East Development Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2021), pp. 215-244.

[2] P. Acharya & A. Banerjee, "International Organizations in Syria: Combating the Socio-Legal Issues," *Supremo Amicus*, vol. 24 (2021), p. 1098.

[3] Mahdi Karimi & Seyed Masoud Mousavi Shafaee, "Poor Governance and Civil War in Syria," *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2018), pp. 49-71.

[4] The researcher knows of a teacher who informed the regime's Military Intelligence agency that she had seen a group of her students participating in the demonstrations, which led to their arrest and the death of some under torture. After the teacher received three warnings from the armed opposition, the students' relatives took their vengeance against her. Such social fissures have been repeated in many ways across the country, along with the rise of categorizations: *shabbīḥ* (regime-linked mercenaries), loyalist, *mundass* (infiltrator), opposition, armed popular committees, revolution hotbeds, and pro-regime areas.

[5] Azmi Bishara, *Syria 2011-2013: Revolution and Tyranny before the Mayhem* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022).

system on the ground, where responding to the needs of the displaced had become an urgent priority. This included establishing shelters and providing food, medicine, blankets, clothing, and other essential items. As the flow of financial and relief aid into Syria increased, the need arose to restructure these initiatives and transfer them to local organizations, whether licensed or unlicensed, in order to facilitate the reception and management of international support, particularly European funding, which requires clear institutional frameworks.[6]

However, support from international organizations for initiatives to provide relief to displaced Syrians has not altered the fact that displacement is a form of family and societal fragmentation. As the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has noted, "due to the unprecedented violence in Syria, many families have lost their customary head of household, usually a male figure".[7] As a result, women and children now constitute a significantly a larger proportion of the displaced population than they did in the general pre-war population. This shift has exposed displaced families to unfamiliar economic challenges, forcing women to live and work in unsafe environments while also facing heightened vulnerability to social discrimination.[8]

Despite the abundance of research addressing various aspects of the Syrian conflict, the conditions of the Syrian family and the broader societal system, – and how they have been affected by the war – remain largely overlooked. Even feminist scholarship, which has critically examined the legal and societal systems that discriminate against women, has rarely addressed the impacts of injustices women endure within their own family structures. In short, academic research has continued to neglect the profound damage the conflict has inflicted on the structure of the Syrian family unit. This study addresses issues of safety and survival for Syrian families in areas affected by war and disaster, as well as the institutional strategies and approaches relevant to their support.

This study addresses two main questions. The first concerns Syrian families – whose members have experienced war, displacement, and their aftermath – require enhanced support within the framework of structural family values that reflect the traditions of Syrian society. This question is premised on the idea that a coherent system of values can assist societies in overcoming the psychological and behavioural repercussions of war. The second question examines the extent to which the initiatives of international donor organizations meet the needs of the Syrian family system and align with its cultural and societal contexts.

Methodology

This study examines quantitative and qualitative data[9] collected from a broad sample of Syrian society. A total of 1,210 questionnaires were were administered across various regions in northeastern, northwestern, and southern Syria, which were under the control of different *de facto* authorities until the fall of the Assad regime. These questionnaires focused on Syrian women and the extent to which war and violence have affected them as key members of their families. The analysis explored patterns of change in women's social and economic roles, as well as the impact of displacement and armed conflict on family stability.

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[6] M. Alkhalil et al., "An Analysis of Humanitarian and Health Aid Harmonisation over a Decade (2011-2019) of the Syrian Conflict," *BMJ Global Health*, vol. 9, no. 10 (2024).

[7] "Syrian Women-Headed Households: Hoping to Survive and Move on," UNFPA, *ReliefWeb* (2013), accessed on 12/11/2023, at: https://bit.ly/42YZlGc

[8] N. Gabiam, "When 'Humanitarianism' Becomes 'Development': The Politics of International Aid in Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 114, no. 1 (2012), pp. 95-107.

[9] *Violence Against Women and Girls in Syria: Laws, Knowledge, Awareness, Attitudes* (Paris: EuroMed Feminist Initiative, 2023).

Table (1): Quantitative Sample

Region, divided by *de facto* lines of control (prior to 8 December 2024)	Provinces	Sample Size	Margin of Error
Northeastern Syria	Hasaka, Deir Ezzor, Qamishli	404	±4.88%
Northwestern Syria	Aleppo, Latakia, Idlib, Hama	404	±4.88%
Southern Syria	Damascus region, Daraa, Suwayda	404	±4.88%

The author conducted 12 in-depth interviews with Syrians working in various fields, including the NGO sector, civil society, human rights, and academia. The interviews complement the survey data by providing a comparison between field oobservations and the perceptions of activists. As shown in the appendix, the qualitative sample included participants from across Syria and with diverse professional backgrounds, providing a comprehensive view of Syrian social reality in the shadow of the conflict. The interviews addressed topics including the impact of violence and displacement on families, the responses of international and local organizations to these challenges, and the potential for rebuilding family structures in the post-conflict phase.

The process of data collection entailed several challenges, most notably the difficulty of reaching some participants due to the security situation. This necessitated conducting repeated workshops to familiarize survey collectors with ethical research codes of conduct and including considerations related to data security and the safety of survey respondents, while simultaneously ensuring objectivity. The study employed the Kobo Toolbox data collection platform alongside paper questionnaires and adopted precise criteria for selecting the sample from areas under the control of various actors. Data specialists verified the data through multiple comparisons and detailed analyses of the results.

The Crisis of the Syrian Family and Its Transforming Roles

The immense suffering inflicted on the Syrian family due to the war has precipitated significant transformations in the societal structure of the Syrian family,[10] highlighting the importance of rebuilding social ties and restructuring the family to adapt to new reality.[11] The extensive literature on the family, which examines traditional family structure and the centrality of childbearing and domestic responsibilities in women's lives, provides a framework for understanding how post-war changes in Syria have impacted family dynamics. These changes reflect a tension between traditional notions of familial roles and the new responsibilities imposed by the exigencies of the war – challenges that are shaping long-standing family norms and giving rise to new, and in some cases unfamiliar, normative values and judgments.

Research indicates that a combination of three factors have imposed a new reality on Syrian women, placing them in the role of primary caregiver for an estimated one-third of families in Syria.[12] These factors are the departure of men through emigration, combat, death, or arrest; widespread displacement, which has compelled women to assume the role of breadwinner and enter the labour market; and deteriorating economic conditions. A 2017 World Bank report[13] indicated that the value of the Syrian pound plummeted

[10] Moosa Elayah & Fatima Al Majdhoub, "Framing Conflict in the Middle East: Yemen and Syria in European Media," in: *Europe and the MENA Region: Media Reporting, Humanitarianism, Conflict Resolution, and Peacebuilding* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2022), pp. 173-199.

[11] Heba Batainah & Michael De Percy, "Women, Peace and Security: What Can Participation mean for Syrian Women?" *Report*, Australian Civil-Military Centre (October 2021).

[12] "Syrian Women-Headed Households."

[13] World Bank Group, "The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria," *Report*, 10/7/2017, accessed on 10/10/2023, at: https://bit.ly/41mSRzT

to its lowest level in history over the course of the conflict, rendering Syria one of the poorest countries in the Middle East and Africa. This situation has given rise to new patterns of livelihood previously unfamiliar to most Syrians, including illegal economic activities such as drug trafficking.

The first factor, the declining number of men in Syria, has had a significant impact on family dynamics and the overall balance of Syrian society. The *Financial Times* reported in 2019[14] that the number of men in Syria was declining due to the war. Citing UN estimates, the report noted that women in Syria had become the primary breadwinners for many families, reflecting a shift of gender roles that was unfamiliar to Syria's traditional society.

Historical experience demonstrate that wars often catalyze social transformations. Including shifts in gender roles and the expansion of women's rights. Progressive and feminist scholars have long argued that the aftermath of World War II prompted many European women to enter the workforce, significantly contributing to post-war economic recovery. This period saw women taking on roles traditionally reserved for men, such as policing and neighbourhood protection,[15] while also leveraging domestic skills to establish small enterprises – including bakeries and restaurants – to generate income for their families. These developments highlight the dual burden women carried, balancing new economic responsibilities with their ongoing caregiving roles.

But to what extent are the experience of women in Germany after World War II applicable to circumstances of Syrian women? What evidence indicates that Syrian women's entry into the labour market could yield gains in rights and freedoms comparable to those achieved by German women? Moreover, can the evolution of gender roles associated with Syrian women's labour market participation be understood without addressing the conceptual structure of the family? Finally, can we ignore the consequences for family balance when traditional gender divisions, deeply embedded in the fabric of Arab society, are broken?[16]

Indeed, the outcomes of women's labour often diverge significantly from those of men. For men, employment outside the home is framed as a natural extension of citizenship, granting access to political decision-making arenas. By contrast, women's participation in the workforce typically remains driven by necessity rather than by transformative change in the prevailing patriarchal order, which continues to enforce a division of roles between men and women.[17]

One interviewee, a university professor, said that before the war, it was rare to see a single woman working as a waitress in a restaurant or café in Syria. However, since the war, such scenes have become common, with girls and women even working at petrol stations or as truck drivers. In other words, Syrian women are now employed in occupations that were once strictly reserved for men in Syrian society. That said, testimonies indicate that women who assumed the role of primary breadwinner throughout the conflict have done so within a system ill-equipped to support their participation in the labour market, particularly in terms of providing the basic services necessary for survival.[18]

A second factor shaping the evolution of family dynamics is the phenomenon of displacement, which has profoundly disrupted the traditional role and status of women as mothers, daughters, sisters, and

14   Chloe Cornish, "Shortage of Men Sees more Syrian Women Enter Workforce in Damascus," *The Financial Times*, 25/1/2019, accessed on 6/2/2024, at: https://shorturl.at/anDE3

15   Hester Vaizey, "Empowerment or Endurance? War Wives' Experiences of Independence During and after the Second World War in Germany 1939-1948," *German History*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2011).

16   Fawzi Saleh al-Sharif & Ilham Omran al-Azabi, "al-Tanshiʾa al-Ijtimāʿiyya fī al-Usra al-ʿArabiyya fī Ẓill Taḍārub Adwār al-Marʾa al-ʿĀmila," *Al-Qurtas Journal*, vol. 9, no. 9 (2020).

17   Mokhtar al-Haras, *Al-Marʾa wa-Ṣunʿ al-Qarār fī al-Maghrib* (Beirut: Edition Majd, 2008).

18   Ashley Bandura & Mercedes Blackwood, "Women's Role in Achieving Sustainable Peace in Syria, A Policy Brief in the U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women," U.S. CSWG, *Policy Brief*, 22/5/2018, accessed on 12/11/2023, at: https://bit.ly/4k5dqrJ

wives within Syrian society. Under pre-war familial and societal norms, women were protected within an environment governed by the authority of a father or husband, who ultimately held the reins of power. This hierarchical structure was reinforced both by cultural expectations of Syrian society and the provisions of personal status law, which positioned the extended kinship network as the primary protectors of women.

In response to a survey question about whether abused women in Syria seek help (and from whom) when they experience violence, more than half of the total sample (56%) said that women subjected to violence do not seek help, of whom 78% would turn to relatives for support. This suggests that displacement to areas where women do not have relatives would increase their vulnerability and the risk of experiencing violence, particularly in the absence of intervention by the law, police, or state institutions. This was politically motivated, justified by a desire to avoid disrupting the deeply rooted patriarchy attached to the Assad regime or acknowledging that women's affairs are extensions of Syria's conservative society.

Within this legal and societal context, displaced women become vulnerable to harassment and sexual exploitation simply to secure necessities. Perpetrators may even be part of the relief distribution system under government supervision. In this regard, an activist from Suwayda recounted incidents of harassment and extortion of displaced women by aid workers:

> Displaced women are often viewed as weaker and lacking protection, even from service providers, including Red Cross personnel. For example, gas merchants affiliated to the Syrian regime, exploit the needs of displaced women. We have documented cases of them harassing displaced women. They know that these women have no one to protect them.[19]

An activist working for a licensed organization in Damascus described the situation in similar terms: "Displaced women are exploited in some locations because they are not from the area and cannot speak out when they are subjected to violence".[20]

Displaced women face widespread discrimination, whether in queues at bakeries and aid distribution centres or when searching for jobs to support their children. Most of these women had never previously worked and had no experience in the labour market, yet they suddenly found themselves thrust into an unfamiliar social environment and an unjust, discriminatory economic dynamic. Labour laws in Syria were not designed to support women's employment, particularly in the private sector. This gap was exploited by employers, who hired many displaced women in factories or farms for low wages, without offering compensation for work-related injuries or retirement benefits. As a result, women were left vulnerable to the whims of their employers, who held unchecked power to set wages and terminate employment without accountability. Some displaced women faced multiple layers of discrimination in the labour market and hiring processes on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and class. In this context, one activist recalled witnessing ethnic discrimination against her Kurdish colleagues solely because of their ethnicity, leading to their exclusion from work: "My Kurdish colleagues are rejected by some employers simply because of their Kurdish background".[21]

Families being forced to flee at short notice have often left displaced women without official identification documents, making it difficult for them to register their children in schools, record births and deaths, or distribute inheritances. Divorce procedures are also complicated by documentation challenges and lack of coordination between various Syrian areas. For example, the failure to transfer a divorce certificate registered in northwestern Syria to government-controlled areas meant that, under Syrian law, a woman would remain legally married. This legal limbo could prevent her from obtaining official government

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[19] Expert No. 8, author interview (remote), southern Syria, 16/1/2024.

[20] Expert No. 10, author interview (remote), southern Syria, 13/1/2024.

[21] Expert No. 9, author interview (remote), northwestern Syria, 17/1/2024.

records should she remarry and have more children. Moreover, a lawyer working in Damascus spoke about the forced marriage of women during the war and their exposure to sexual violence, saying: "All of these displaced women are vulnerable to discrimination and sexual violence, including early marriage and possibly forced sex trafficking. This threatens the security and stability of the family, whose female members are also vulnerable to pornography".[22]

The loss of family and community support when a woman is displaced is a fundamental factor in the disruption of the Syrian family structure. This underscores the responsibility of the state, law, and institutions to play an active role in protecting families and women. Relying on society alone to safeguard women has proven ineffective, in times of war and stability alike. This also applies when women enter the workforce as employers exploit women's circumstances, a situation made worse by the state's failure to enforce legal protections within the private sector, particularly concerning minimum wages, health insurance, and working hours.[23]

The third factor is that of poverty and economic decline, which has had grave consequences no less harmful than displacement. It has driven many to seek livelihoods through illicit activities previously unfamiliar to Syrians, such as drug and arms trafficking. A significant number of young men and women have become involved in drug distribution and consumption. This trend has been one driver behind recurring demonstrations in Suwayda since 17 August 2023. Protestors have demanded the expulsion of drug dealers from the area, raising banners that denounce the sale and consumption of drugs as a violation of the province's values and assault on its core moral principles.

An activist from Suwayda told the researcher that young women were targeted with Cyber Extortion and economic blackmail to coerce them into distributing drugs:

> I want to be clear: society is experiencing a violent moral shock. The rise of armed groups has led to exploitation of women and girls through a system of digital blackmail via social media, forcing them to participate in criminal activities such as kidnapping and drug distribution. One example comes from the city of Salkhad, where women and girls were blackmailed into working with an armed gang. When Military Security arrested some members of the gang, a Facebook page published inappropriate material, including photos both of underage girls and married women, retrieved from the gang members' mobile phones that exposed women who had been coerced into working with them. The release of this material enraged their families led to these women's abuse; there were reports that some of them were killed. Due to the closed nature of the city's society, the incident was covered up and our efforts to report on it or uncover the identities of the murdered women were blocked.[24]

Yet the anger expressed by Suwayda residents in their anti-drug demonstrations[25] is a crucial factor that could help lay the groundwork for rebuilding a moral family system by reinforcing societal values that reject such activities. Some studies indicate that young men and women in low-income communities are more likely to be drawn to delinquent peers.[26] However, the presence of families that raise their children well, even under conditions of poverty, can provide individuals with a reliable, solid foundation and a moral compass.[27] This demonstrates the importance of the family as a key pillar of resilience that must be

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[22] Expert No. 3, author interview (remote), southern Syria, 17/1/2024.

[23] Thuraya Aqsari, *Ishkāliyyat Khurūj al-Marʾa min al-Bayt wa-Dukhūlihā al-ʿAmal wa-l-Majāl al-ʿĀmm (al-Maghrib Anumūdhajan)* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2019), p. 116.

[24] Expert No. 8, author interview (remote), southern Syria, 16/1/2024.

[25] "Bitafwīḍ min Ahālī al-Suwaydāʾ. Iʿtiqāl 4 Ashkhāṣ Ḍimna Ḥamlat Rijāl al-Karāma Ḍidd al-Mukhadarāt," *Althania (Youtube Channel)*, 26/1/2025, accessed on 10/2/2024, at: https://bit.ly/4170NUk

[26] Patrick H. Tolan, Nancy G. Guerra & Luisa R. Montaini-Klovdahl, "Staying out of Harm's Way: Coping and the Development of Inner-City Children," in: S. A. Wolchik & I. N. Sandler (eds.), *Handbook of Children's Coping: Linking Theory and Intervention* (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), pp. 453-479.

[27] Miguelina Germán, Nancy A. Gonzales & Larry Dumka, "Familism Values as a Protective Factor for Mexican-Origin Adolescents Exposed to Deviant Peers," *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2009), pp.16-42.

supported to help societies move forward, particularly in light of the widespread and ongoing displacement currently affecting Syrian society.

The Effectiveness of Local Organizations in Supporting Syrian Families

> What is the point of educating women in our region that beating and insulting a woman is unacceptable, and that she has equal rights with men – when she is laughed at and mocked when reporting spousal assault to the police? In our training, supported by European organizations, we teach women that they have equal rights with their husbands, stirring up tensions within the family, yet there is no legal or governmental support for women's rights and demands.[28]

During this study, both male and female civil society activists in Syria repeatedly voiced similar concerns regarding the nature of projects funded by Western organizations.

It is undeniable that women in conflict zones require additional support, particularly given that women and children are often the groups most affected by war and disaster.[29] This has led to a global trend of supporting women in war zones, in line with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 of 2000,[30] which established the Women, Peace, and Security agenda and called for its implementation in conflict zones and for allocation of significant fund to support this effort. In response, Western organizations began designing projects aligned with Resolution 1325, first to secure their share of core funding, and subsequently to set up intermediary organizations or groups in conflict zones to implement projects focused on economic, political, and human rights empowerment. These dynamics apply to organizations operating in Syria.

One cannot overlook the positive impact of such projects for Syrian women and, by extension, on other family members, as "women and girls are more vulnerable to poverty [than other groups]. In villages, they constitute more than half of the population, and their activities remain primarily linked to difficult household tasks, due to lack of fair and equal access to basic infrastructure".[31] Therefore, empowering women and ensuring they have equitable access to resources and opportunities serves the best interests of the family, provided that all family members are aware of, and understand, the meaning of partnership and the importance of equality between men and women in opportunities, rights, and responsibilities.

In this context, civil society has a valuable role to play in raising awareness of the importance of implementing state laws that regulate the process of community justice. Civil society can exert direct influence through programmes aimed at strengthening family cohesion and supporting individuals in facing the psychological and social challenges brought about by the war. As part of the social fabric, civil society possesses the knowledge and flexibility needed to navigate changes in family structure, making it an essential component in the process of building peace and societal stability.[32]

Alongside civil society, local organizations play an essential role in meeting the needs of affected communities. Owing to their proximity to the population and deep understanding of the cultural and social context, they are well-positioned to provide effective support tailored to the actual needs of families.[33] Their role complements that of civil society through the implementation of programmes that enhance families'

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[28] Expert No. 3, author interview (remote), southern Syria, 19/1/2024.

[29] Moosa Elayah, "al-Ṣirāʿāt al-ʿArabiyya: al-Taṭawwurāt wa-l-Anmāṭ," in: Ibrahim Fraihat (ed.), *Fahm al-Ṣirāʿāt al-ʿArabiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024).

[30] United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1325 (2000): Adopted by the Security Council at its 4213th meeting, on 31 October 2000," 31/10/2000, accessed on 8/2/2024, at: https://bit.ly/4b6XFfV

[31] Aqsari, p. 125.

[32] Alice Chancellor, "The Women Want the Fall of the (Gendered) Regime: In What Ways are Syrian Women Challenging State Feminism Through an Online Feminist Counterpublic?," *Cornell International Affairs Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2020), pp. 137-183.

[33] Moosa Elayah & Willemijn Verkoren, "Civil Society During War: The Case of Yemen," *Peacebuilding*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2020), pp. 476-498.

ability to adapt to the new reality and contribute to rebuilding trust, both among family members and between the family and the community.[34] To fulfil their role during and after conflict, local organizations rely on the financial, logistical, and technical support of international organizations. While this support is often crucial, it can pose challenges due to the insufficient adaptation to local contexts.

In fact, policies and programmes designed by international organizations may be misaligned to the social and cultural environment in which they operate, thereby reducing their effectiveness. This underscores the need to integrate the role of international organizations with that of local organizations and civil society in order to achieve reconstruction goals in an effective and sustainable manner.[35] Because international organizations base their agenda on UNSC Resolution 1325, feminist efforts add another dimension to this theoretical framework by emphasizing women's empowerment within the family and society. Feminism enhances the role of women in difficult circumstances as active participants in the peacebuilding process, particularly by empowering them to help create new family dynamics that are better adapted to and more responsive to the challenges brought about by war.[36]

Each of these components – community reconstruction, civil society, and local, international, and feminist organizations – forms part of an integrated system with the potential to contribute to a comprehensive reconstruction process. No component can operate in isolation; each contributes to creating an environment that supports the rebuilding of families and communities, while respecting their unique cultural and social contexts. The ultimate goal of this integrated approach is to achieve genuine and sustainable reconstruction, restoring dignity to individuals and cohesion to families.

Although local organizations have done important work in Syria, their activities remain unsustainable. Their existence, growth, and continuity depend on two factors. The first is the leniency or repressiveness of the security forces or *de facto* authorities. An example can be found in statistics from Impact Research[37] regarding organizations active in Syria up until 2021. In 2015, Daraa was home to as many as 50 organizations; however, this number swiftly dropped to ten after the Assad regime regained control of the governorate in 2018. The interests of the intelligence services are also intertwined with those of the government, as one activist in Suwayda pointed out:

> The regime refuses to license civil society organizations in Suwayda. Instead, it rejects, boycotts, and supresses them. In 2018, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour issued a decision prohibiting cooperation with civil society organizations in the province on matters related to combating violence against women except for the Syrian Trust for Development, which is licensed by the ministry. Accordingly, any lawyer found to have cooperated with civil society organizations in a pro bono defence for women is tried by the Bar Association. All the lawyers who work with us, both men and women, are subject to restrictions and are wanted by the [regime's] security agencies and the Palestine Branch.[38]

The second factor affecting the sustainability of local organizations in Syria is the issue of funding. Donors largely determine the programmes, projects, and activities of these organizations, making them dependent on donor's agendas and priorities. This can shift attention away from certain aspects of social work in favour of others.[39] It explains the imbalance in the activities of local organizations, where some aspects receive more attention depending on the amount of funding available, even if this comes at the expense

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[34] Rania Maktabi, "Female Citizenship under Authoritarian Rule in the Middle East: Baʿthist Syria and Beyond," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2018), pp. 157-175.

[35] R. B. Khoury, "Aid, Activism, and the Syrian War," PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, Northwestern, 2021.

[36] Ayşegül Gökalp Kutlu, "The Gender of Migration: A Study on the Syrian Migrant Women in Turkey," *Kadın/Woman 2000, Journal for Women's Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2020), pp. 21-38.

[37] "List of Syrian CSOs: 2020-2021 Mapping," *Impact Research*, accessed on 18/9/20, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQEt

[38] Expert No. 8, author interview (remote), southern Syria, 16/1/2024.

[39] Moosa Elayah, Q. Gaber & M. Fenttiman, "From Food to Cash Assistance: Rethinking Humanitarian Aid in Yemen," *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, vol. 7, no. 11 (2022).

of actual human needs. The neglect of people and society stems from neoliberalism, which enshrines "the desperate defence of capital as an absolute value".[40] Furthermore, "the deep nature of the neoliberal model lies in the prioritization of the market over people, society, or the environment, which is what Thomas Frank calls the ideology of 'One Market Under God'."[41]

Impact Research's statistics show that between 2020 and 2021, the number of active local organizations in Syria reached 934. However, only 16 of these organizations specialized in working with children. In contrast, the number of relief and charitable organizations, as well as those specializing in women's empowerment, is increasing. Interviewees attributed the high number of women's empowerment projects to the availability of funding. Their initiatives ranged from integrating women into the labour market through vocational training aimed at providing a potential source of income, to raising legal awareness and enhancing women's ability to navigate official procedures. This includes obtaining government documents, proving customary marriages, registering children in the civil registry, and securing inheritance for themselves or their children in cases involving the loss of a father or husband.

Although respondents acknowledged the presence of many organizations dedicated to women's empowerment, the survey results revealed a discrepancy in awareness of various types of violence among women of differing education levels: 27% among women with low education, 51% with intermediate education, and 65% with higher education. When respondents were asked about the extent to which organizations in Syria met their needs for legal support relative to psychological support, they expressed limited recognition of the effectiveness and legal presence of women's support organizations, with only 28% of the total sample reporting that such services were being provided. This percentage varied across regions, with the most pessimistic responses recorded in Hasaka (6%), Qamishli (14%), and Daraa (7%), indicating that the organizations dedicated to women's empowerment fell short of meeting needs.

The difficulty of conducting scholarly research on Syria prior to the revolution and the war – because researchers are required to adhere to regulations imposed by security and intelligence agencies – has resulted in a dearth of statistics and studies on the issue of violence against women. This, in turn, has made it challenging to conduct comparative research to assess the situation of women before and during the war.

The data underpinning the current study show that the rate violence experienced by Syrian women varies across regions: 71% in northwest Syria, 66% in northeast Syria, and 69% in southern Syria. However, these figures must be approached with caution: Nearly half of Syrians are female, and they suffer additional forms of violence beyond the political and economic violence endured by both men and women. This reflects a deeper rupture in the family system, raising questions about the extent to which international organizations – and the local ones they fund – are committed to supporting the Syrian family system during times of crisis and war.

Are these organizations providing services to reunite families and preserve the social values necessary to rebuild society and social institutions? Such services might include launching educational programmes for the generation raised during the war, including mental health programmes; war trauma treatment; and behavioural and cognitive therapies to address generational gaps, identity fragmentation, integration into traditional societal affiliations, and alignment of new affiliations in host communities. Equally important are development projects aimed at narrowing the class disparities exacerbated by the war, addressing its impact on race relations, and responding to its consequences for children and their families. Behavioural and psychological projects to enhance self-confidence and foster psychological and physical resilience among the war generation are also crucial in this regard.

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[40] al-Hussain Shakrani, *Ḥuquq al-Ajyāl al-Muqbila bi-l-Ishāra ilā al-Awḍāʿ al-ʿArabiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2018), p. 96.

[41] Murad Diyani, *Ḥurriyyah – Musāwāt – Indimāj Ijtimāʿī: Naẓariyyat al-ʿAdāla fī al-Namūdhaj al-Librālī al-Mustadām* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2014), pp. 50-54.

Most interviewees questioned the ability of international organizations to understand the cultural context of Syrian society and to address the needs of individuals and families in a manner that is appropriate to that context. They argued that it is impossible to pursue feminist goals by empowering women to understand their rights while leaving their male counterparts uninformed. An academic and instructor at Damascus University suggested that, at times, it may be necessary to circumvent the agenda of the donor organization. She conducts European-funded training sessions in which she incorporates elements aligned with the traditional context, such as encouraging women to recognize the traditional role of men in Syrian society, to understand that change cannot occur overnight, and to be aware of their rights while exercising diplomacy.[42]

Another activist shared her experience of adapting the Syrian societal context to align with the agenda of a European donor organization. She argued that the issue with the project in question began with its title, "*My Body Is Mine*" – a European formulation which she believed would provoke backlash from Syrians, both men and women, as it encourages women to assert bodily autonomy in a way that could be culturally provocative. In response, she transformed the Arabic title into: "*I Am Not a Piece of Cloth*!". This allowed her to reframe the project's goal around the issue of how women are judged based on their clothing. The girls and women in the campaign wore clothes in various styles, including traditional rural attire, allowing rural women to assert: "I wear rural clothes, but I am educated". Similarly, girls wore hijabs to express that they were both veiled and modern. The activist said:

> We shared the campaign on social media under the title "*I Am Not a Piece of Cloth*" and invited people to send in photos expressing the same concept. During the campaign, we also received photos and messages from young men, saying that they too were judged based on their appearance. For example, one young man shared that he was mocked because of his long hair, with people calling him "*ṭanṭ*" [a derogatory term implying effeminacy or homosexuality]. Another man working as a truck driver and porter sent a photo of himself dressed in shabby clothes, accompanied by the message: "I am a porter, but my children are studying at university".[43]

In this respondent's opinion, the campaign was successful because it did not clash with Syrian society's limitations on women's freedom to claim bodily autonomy, an inviolable principle with deeply rooted religious and social conceptual roots. However, the organization would not have been able to secure funding had it not manipulated the campaign' title to align with local values. Such efforts remain rare and are largely individual initiatives, driven by the awareness of activists rather than that by international donor bodies.

Overall, both elements – the conflict between civil society organizations and the authorities, and the mismatch between the programmes these organizations attempt to implement on the ground in Syria and the agendas of European donor organizations, hinder the efforts of civil society organizations to carry out projects that meet the needs of Syrian society in general, and families in particular. The funding and logistical support are among the most important factors influencing civil society work in terms of impact. Nevertheless, this factor, which can serve as an obstacle to the work of organizations and civil society, is frequently overlooked.[44]

Local Knowledge Production and Its Discontents

Young Syrians have been navigating a digital revolution and a popular uprising since 2011, giving rise to new understandings of affiliation and behaviour, particularly a sense of belonging to what Manuel Castells describes as a "network society". One defining feature of such a society is the tension between identities

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[42] Expert No. 10, author interview (remote), southern Syria, 13/1/2024.

[43] Expert No. 2, author interview (remote), northwestern Syria, 9/1/2024.

[44] Hussam Shehadeh, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī* (Damascus: Bayt al-Muwatin li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawziʿ, 2015), pp. 37-39.

rooted in place and those shaped by networks that transcend spatial barriers.[45] For this generation, affiliations stem from the convergence of digital network flows and a sense of belonging to primary communities, which have been reshaped by the post-revolutionary dynamics in Syria. As such, these generations are simultaneously connected to, and distanced from, both affiliations.

This hybridization produces what Darren Barney calls "network identities", where differences and commonalities generate a diversity of behaviour and affiliations.[46] These identities and societal conditions may obscure the concept of citizenship for a generation that has grown up amid war, witnessed the injustice and corruption of ruling institutions, and seen their failure to improve the population's economic well-being. This is compounded by experiences of displacement, migration, and the disintegration of family structures in which stereotypical roles have shifted, with mothers and, at times, even children assuming responsibility for the family's livelihood.

There is an urgent need to strengthen the cohesion of societal values, customs, and behaviours to ensure the continuity and vitality of the family and, subsequently, to ensure the moral and behavioural well-being of individuals and national institutions. Reconstruction, relief, and empowerment efforts in Syria cannot succeed without concurrent efforts to strengthen the identities of the younger generation and support their behavioural orientation and emerging affiliations toward sustainable social and national development.

The 1987 Brundtland Report on sustainable development[47] addressed the need to consider the social dimension as a pillar of sustainable development. Sustainable development is linked to social capital, represented by the relationships and networks formed among people, the degree of trust shared between them, and the associated challenges of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization.[48] In the context of war, disaster, community reconstruction, and family support, local research in the countries affected can provide a body of knowledge steering governments toward both institutional and human development and sustainability.

Overcoming societal emergencies and crises requires cooperation with the family itself. For instance, it was important – as one research has concluded – to promote Mexican family values to shape adolescents' behaviour and their interaction with institutional systems and policies, thereby meeting the external environment's demands for appropriate behaviour. It was essential to devise methods, approaches, and tools that support family values, given the family's role in addressing problems associated with adolescent behaviour, particularly within the school context.[49]

European research in the context of wars and disasters has also addressed the importance of family stability, in a field now recognized as Family Studies. For instance, scholars have studied the effects of the Second World War on the generations that lived through it, examining symptoms of stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the loss of a sense of security, as well as the resulting behavioural and psychological problems.[50] Other studies have focused on the epigenetic impact (changes in gene expression due to environmental

[45] Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 11-48.

[46] Darin Barney, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Shabakī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), pp. 179-204.

[47] *Our Common Future: The World Commission on Environment and Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[48] Ibrahim al-Issawi, *al-ʿAdāla al-Ijtimāʿiyya wa-l-Namādhij al-Tanmawiyya: Maʿ Ihtimām Khāṣṣ bi-Ḥālat Miṣr wa-Thawratihā* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2014), p.150.

[49] Germán, Gonzales & Dumka, pp. 16-42.

[50] See also: Gail Agronick et al., "New York City Young Adults' Psychological Reactions to 9/11: Findings from the Reach for Health Longitudinal Study," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 39. no. 1-2 (2007), pp. 79-90; Kimberly A. Ehntholt & William Yule, "Practitioner Review: Assessment and Treatment of Refugee Children and Adolescents Who have Experienced War-Related Trauma," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 47, no. 12 (2006), pp. 1197-1210; Fawzyiah Hadi, Maria Magdalena Llabre & Susan Spitzer, "Gulf War-Related Trauma and Psychological Distress of Kuwaiti Children and their Mothers," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 19, no. 5 (2006), pp. 653-662; Roberta J. Apfel & Bennett Simon, *Minefields in Their Hearts: The Mental Health of Children in War and Communal Violence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

factors) of wars and disasters, including the epigenetic impact of the famine that hit Germany between 1916 and 1918 on the children and grandchildren of those who lived through it when they were 8-12 years old.[51] Such findings are now incorporated into policy and practice in German family affairs, informing ongoing evaluations of services provided to families in the areas of healthcare for children with disabilities and young children in kindergartens, and the extent of the positive and negative impacts on family structures in Germany.

Other studies have addressed the issue of maintaining positive behavioural modes that were prevalent before the war, and the role they can play in overcoming post-traumatic conditions.[52] Some studies have focused on monitoring stress-related growth, transformational adaptation,[53] and post-traumatic growth by observing the ability of those exposed to war and disaster-related trauma to identify and adhere to values[54] that provide stability during times of acute stress. This research has focused on the dissemination of positive societal images experienced or created during the war, such as community solidarity and mechanisms of civic engagement. The promotion of such values contributes to enhancing resilience and resistance among peoples, helping them to survive and find new outlets in war. Another comparative study covering the period of World War II, concluded that all age groups recover from poor physical growth once their conditions improve through post-war health and social welfare programmes.[55]

Such studies have not remained confined to library shelves; they have been used to shape the policies of Western institutions and governments toward building stable societies. This perspective contributed to the emergence of the *Gemeentilijke Gezondheidsdienst* (GGD), the municipal health service in the Netherlands.[56] Branches of this institution were set up in each municipality to address children's mental, physical, and behavioural health issues. From birth, every child and their family are connected to their local GGD, which oversees vaccinations and monitors developmental milestones both at home and in school. The GGD also assigns specialists to schools; if any concerning behaviour or developmental issue are observed, the specialist communicates with the family to coordinate support for the child. In cases of parental separation or the death of a family member, for example, the specialist intervenes to spare the child psychological trauma that could negatively affect their behaviour.

Some may argue that it is still too early to conduct similar research on Syrian family affairs, given that the country remains in a state of conflict. However, the studies cited above, and the pressing needs of families and society in Syria,[57] demonstrate that it is imperative to begin developing a vision for studying family affairs in Syria. It is equally important to establish and operationalize Arab institutions dedicated to producing research relevant to Syria's current context. Such efforts are essential for recovery and strategic human development capable of advancing the building of a society resilient to crises, including the normalization of drug trafficking or the distortion of religious and moral values into drivers of extremism.

Moreover, the rebuilding of family and community institutions through effective projects and initiatives must be grounded in local research. Development programmes currently led and funded by international organizations are largely based on studies conducted in Western or African societies with past experiences of war and disaster.

[51] Gerard J. van den Berg & Pia R. Pinger, "A Validation Study of Transgenerational Effects of Childhood Conditions on the Third Generation Offspring's Economic and Health Outcomes Potentially Driven by Epigenetic Imprinting," *Discussion Paper*, no. 7999, IZA (Feb. 2014), accessed on 3/10/2023, at: https://bit.ly/3CZpREN

[52] Stephen Joseph, P. Alex Linley & George James Harris, "Understanding Positive Change Following Trauma and Adversity: Structural Clarification," *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2005), pp. 83-96.

[53] Carolyn Aldwin, *Stress, Coping, and Development: An Integrative Perspective* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994).

[54] Tolan, Guerra & Montaini-Klovdahl, pp. 453-479.

[55] Noël Cameron, "Child Growth and Armed Conflict," *Annals of Human Biology*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2023).

[56] "Wat doet een GGD," *GGD GHOR Nederland*, accessed on 8/2/2024, at: https://bit.ly/3EH7Bkh

[57] Shatha Dhafer al-Jundi, "*Baʿd 7 Sanawāt Ḥarb: al-Usra al-Sūriyya Bayn al-Tafakkuk al-Ijtimāʿī wa-l-Nuzūḥ wa-l-Lujūʾ*," *Jiroun*, 11/12/2017, accessed on 7/1/2024, at: https://bit.ly/41jUZZ1

This framework, shaped by various experiences, renders such programmes foreign, and perhaps even alien, to Arab (and specifically Syrian) society. It is also important to give research centres an active role in protecting the interests of future generations. While international laws and conventions prioritize the protection of children during disasters and conflicts, the Arab world – embroiled in wars and internal conflicts often fuelled by regional and international forces – has failed to uphold this principle. Instead, Arab children are frequently dragged into conflicts, in violation of International Humanitarian Law and the broader human rights framework.[58]

One of the participants in the current study, a feminist writer with extensive experience in social work, likewise emphasized the importance of fostering knowledge production within Arab research institutions and through experts and researchers who come from the same Arab context, arguing that Arab researchers are better equipped to understand the region's realities, contexts, and needs. She added that local Syrian organizations often face challenges in their interactions with international organizations, as they risk being treated as tools for implementation rather than sources of knowledge. As the participant put it:

> Even when we are commissioned to conduct research, our role is limited to data collection within Syria on violence against Syrian women, for example. As for producing research-based knowledge, that remains off limits to us; it is entrusted exclusively to European research organizations. This is deeply painful, as it forms the basis for conclusions that are often misaligned with the actual needs and realities of our societies.[59]

Conclusion

Bashar al-Assad's flight from Syria on 8 December 2024 sparked widespread debate about how to navigate the country's next political and economic phase, including reconstruction, peacebuilding, and transitional justice. However, little attention has been devoted to the recovery of the Syrian family. The findings of this study underscore the need for such attention, showing that Syrian society continues to face numerous challenges related to families and women, chief among them the dilemmas of displacement, which has fragmented the Syrian family system. This necessitates substantial efforts to promote recovery from the psychological shocks and behavioural disruptions suffered by women, children, and men alike.[60]

This study has shown that the prolonged war in Syria has profoundly impacted family and social structures, dismantling the fundamental bonds that once underpinned social cohesion. It has also highlighted the urgent need to provide psychosocial support to affected individuals and communities. As international organizations strive to address the resulting challenges, it is essential to consider the unique cultural and social fabric of Syrian society. Insufficient attention to these factors has diminished the effectiveness of such efforts, despite good intentions. In this context, greater sensitivity to cultural and social dynamics would enhance the adaptability and relevance of these initiatives, aligning them more closely with the actual needs of Syrian society. Adopting such an approach would not only accelerate post-war recovery but also reinforce societal values that benefit all members of the society.

Public policies must therefore be developed to support families and society to promote positive values, rebuilding the social fabric, and to consolidating the concepts of citizenship, identity, and belonging. Civil

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58   Shakrani, pp. 380-396.

59   Expert No. 7, author interview (remote), northwestern Syria, 18/1/2024.

60   Boshra Al Ibraheem et al., "The Health Effect of the Syrian Conflict on IDPs and Refugees," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2017), p. 140; Eran Bendavid et al., "The Effects of Armed Conflict on the Health of Women and Children," *The Lancet*, vol. 397, no. 10273 (2021), pp. 522-532; Hazem Ghassan Abdo, "Impacts of War in Syria on Vegetation Dynamics and Erosion Risks in Safita Area, Tartous, Syria," *Regional Environmental Change*, vol. 18, no. 6 (2018), pp. 1707-1719; Aleksandar Kešeljević & Rok Spruk, "Estimating the Effects of Syrian Civil War," *Empirical Economics*, vol. 66, no. 2 (2024), pp. 671-703.

society organizations must also be empowered and granted the opportunity to implement projects that align with the social context they serve, while also liberating them from the constraints of authoritarianism and subservience to the agendas of Western-funded organizations. Such empowerment would allow civil society to function more effectively and generate a truly positive impact on society, responding to the needs of the population in ways that are compatible with their cultural and social realities.

Arab funding organizations should be established, with civil policies and agendas tailored to specific Arab societal contexts to support the activities of local civil society organizations serving families and affected communities in the Arab world. This requires combined efforts by various actors: intellectuals, policymakers, researchers, and civil society activists. Furthermore, dedicated research centres should be established to study the effects of war on families, focusing on qualitative, quantitative, descriptive, and field studies of emerging phenomena resulting from wars and disasters. Such research would enhance the quality of public policy and produce support strategies that align with the cultural specificities of each society. These research centres would also offer deeper insight into the changing needs of families and the challenges involved in community reconstruction and broader development processes. The resulting research would help develop the activities and initiatives of organizations working to support affected communities. In this regard, it is also essential to enhance cooperation between research centres, universities, and international academic institutions, to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise.

Appendix: Interviewees

Expert's Specialization	Location of Activity	*De Facto* Authority	Organization Code	Gender	Date of Interview	Expert Number
Director of an organization working with women and children, providing legal workshops, and running awareness-raising campaigns addressing gender-based violence, as well as providing support to affected women	NW Syria	Opposition	1M	Female	12 January 2024	1
Social activist focusing on socio-economic support, cultural advocacy, and assisting displaced women	NW Syria	Opposition	2M	Female	9 January 2024	2
Legal expert and scholar on the challenges of legal representation in cases of gender-based violence; activist advocating for legal reforms	Southern Syria	Government	3M	Male	19 January 2024	3
Administrative employee of an organization active in SDF-held areas of Hasaka, Qamishli and Raqqa, which organizes initiatives on peacebuilding and community dialogue on women's issues	NE Syria	Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)	4M	Female	22 January 2024	4

Human rights activist and director of a legal organization; discusses community resilience programmes and advocacy for women's rights	Mid Syria	Government	5M	Male	6 January 2024	5
Journalist and lawyer, covers challenges of advocacy and provides legal support to victims of gender-based violence	Southern Syria	Government	6M	Male	8 January 2024	6
Founder of an economic empowerment programme in northwestern Syria that trains displaced women to manage their affairs in their host areas	NW Syria	Opposition	7M	Female	18 January 2024	7
Founder and director of an organization operating in southern Syria, dedicated to empowering women in political leadership and running awareness campaigns on women's rights	Southern Syria	Government	8M	Male	16 January 2024	8
Coordinator of a programme focusing on community education, promoting legal literacy, and addressing gender-based violence among rural women	NW Syria	Opposition	9M	Female	7 January 2024	9
University lecturer and trainer in professional skills and economic resilience to support women's financial independence	Southern Syria	Government	10M	Female	13 January 2024	10
Social worker providing trauma counselling and psychological support to women affected by violence	NE Syria	SDF	11M	Female	5 January 2024	11
Founder of an organization caring for widows and orphans	Coastal Syria	Government	12M	Female	10 January 2024	12

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Mehdi Mabrouk[*]

The Illusion of the Tunisian Exception: Civil Society and Democratic Transition[**]

أوهام الاستثناء التونسي: المجتمع المدني وامتحان تجربة الانتقال الديمقراطي

Abstract: Tunisia's democratic transition has attracted considerable scholarly attention, and is often portrayed as a notable exception. However, the reversal of most democratic gains in the decade following the 2011 revolution has called this narrative into question. This study deconstructs the notion of Tunisian exceptionalism through a critical examination of civil society, tracing its role from the pre-revolutionary period through the democratic transition, and up to Kais Saied's 2021 coup. The study shows that Tunisian civil society contributed to the derailment of the democratic transition in three ways: first, by exacerbating Islamist-secular polarization, resulting in a fragmented "two-headed" civil society; second, by becoming an extension of political parties; and third, by encroaching on the role of the state, undermining its legitimacy and effectiveness in the public sphere.

Keywords: Tunisia; Democratic Transition; Exceptionalism; Civil Society

الملخص: ظلت تجربة الانتقال الديمقراطي في تونس مثار اهتمام الباحثين، وقد عدّها بعضهم استثناءً دالًّا. غير أنّ المآلات التي عرفتها التجربة لاحقًا مع الانقلاب على جل المكتسبات التي راكمتها البلاد خلال ما يناهز عقدًا من الزمن على اندلاع الثورة التونسية عام 2011 وضعت تلك الأطروحة موضع شك. تُفكك هذه الدراسة مقولة الاستثناء التونسي استنادًا إلى دراسة منزلة المجتمع المدني بدءًا من مرحلة ما قبل الثورة التونسية، ومرورًا بمرحلة الانتقال الديمقراطي، وانتهاءً بالانقلاب الذي قاده قيس سعيّد عام 2021، وتبيّن الدراسة أنّ المجتمع المدني التونسي ساهم في تعطيل مسار الانتقال الديمقراطي من خلال ثلاثة طرائق: تعزيز الاستقطاب الإسلامي-العلماني إلى حد ظهور مجتمع مدني بـ «رأسين»، وتحوّل منظمات المجتمع المدني التونسي إلى أذرع سياسية للأحزاب، وتغوّل دور المجتمع على حساب الدولة وسلبها شرعيتها وفعاليتها في الفضاءات العامة.

كلمات مفتاحية: تونس؛ الانتقال الديمقراطي؛ الاستثناء؛ المجتمع المدني.

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Introduction

For nearly a decade, many scholars regarded Tunisia's democratic transition as an exception in a regional context where other Arab revolutions faltered early, descending into civil wars or military coups that crushed aspirations for freedom and democracy. These failures also dashed the optimistic view that the Arab revolutions had finally dispelled the thesis of Arab democratic intractability, premised on a belief that Arab-Islamic culture and its underlying social structures are inherently incompatible with democratic values.

Since 25 July 2021,[1] however, amidst a burgeoning populism, the very notion of a Tunisian exception has come under question. The swift dismantlement of the institutions of the democratic transition following the coup against the 2014 Constitution presented an opportunity to reconsider the praise lavished on the unique Tunisian experience. In the end, Tunisia's trajectory closely resembled that of other Arab countries: the democratic transition was disrupted, political forces that did not believe in democracy assumed power, and society's inability to defend its experiment led to its surrender. This assertion contradicts the conclusions in most studies of the "Tunisian exception", which have emphasized the long history of Tunisian political elites, the modernity of the state, the dynamics of consensus among political parties, and its extraordinary civil society, which, even under authoritarian rule, carved out a significant space for rights and freedoms that successive political regimes had not dared to challenge.

This study deconstructs the Tunisian exceptionalism thesis and the mythologization of Tunisian civil society, exposing their weaknesses by examining civil society's position and its role in derailing the democratic transition. Eschewing culturalist approaches that frame "Islamic despotism" as an intrinsic value, this deconstruction does not assume that Tunisian society is structurally incapable of democratization, which merely restates the thesis of democratic intractability. Instead, we should ask: What explains the ease with which the institutions of the democratic transition were dismantled? What explains the feeble resistance to authoritarianism, the surrender of Tunisian elites, the revival of a culture of fear, a renewed aversion to public affairs, and the return to a place that elites believed they had definitively left behind?

Answering these two questions helps in grasping the various manifestations of the failure of the Tunisian revolution since the 2019 elections that brought President Kais Saied to power, among them the curtailment of individual and collective freedoms and the retreat from a political and institutional legacy of parties, unions, and representative bodies that date back to the early 20th century. Moreover, the economic malaise that accompanied the democratic transition – recession, sluggish growth rates, rampant unemployment, rising prices, and deteriorating services[2] – cannot reliably explain the failure, especially given the growing demand for Saied's brand of populism and authoritarianism. The same economic and social conditions persist today and have even worsened under his rule, including shortages of staple food items, such as cereals, sugar, and oil, rising unemployment rates, and a growth rate that dipped to 0.4% in 2023.[3]

I will similarly avoid the socio-culturalist approach, which perpetuates the notion of Arab democratic intractability by rendering it an inherent quality, thereby ignoring the intricate dynamics of Arab societies,

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[1] Scholars disagree over how to label this event. Some refer to it simply as a coup, while others insist it is more precisely a constitutional coup. In my opinion, the discussion extends beyond the legal and constitutional foundations of President Kais Saied's actions. Beginning on 25 July, he instituted a series of measures that enabled him to abolish the 2014 constitution, dissolve the government, dismantle the Supreme Judicial Council, and suspend most of the independent constitutional bodies. He further monopolized power, dismantled the institutions of the democratic transition, and began formulating a political system based on a "grassroots structure" and the exclusion of mediating bodies, parties, organizations, and associations. All of this took place amid an authoritarian populist discourse that derailed the country's democratic transition, however flawed.

[2] In the first six months of 2013, Tunisia experienced shortages of several staple foodstuffs, including bread, milk, sugar, and tea. Prices rose to unprecedented levels, and hundreds of vital medicines became unavailable. Despite this, virtually all demonstrations came to a halt.

[3] "La croissance économique au quatrième trimestre 2023," *Statisques Tunisie*, accessed on 26/8/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/y457jtyk

the significant transformations they have experienced, and the role of various actors within them. Instead, I turn to political values, examining the convictions of civil society actors – organizations, associations, and political elites, whether partisan or otherwise – to assess the depth of their belief in democratic values through their responses to specific events: elections, conflicts, disputes, and initiatives. Tunisia underwent a democratic transition without democrats,[4] including within civil society organizations and associations. Accordingly, the Tunisian cultural, intellectual, and political incubator is so atrophied that it is incapable of embracing and consolidating democracy, whether at the level of values (due to historical reasons rooted in the contexts of political modernization and state building, specifically the post-independence state) or of practice (due to the rampant mutual antagonism among most political actors who shaped the post-revolutionary political landscape).

This paper deconstructs the notion of Tunisian exceptionalism and assesses the extent to which it was embodied in the realities of Tunisian political life during the decade 2011-2021. To this end, I first offer an analysis of the theory of Tunisian exceptionalism itself, unpacking its foundations using Tunisia-focused research. I then examine Tunisian civil society as an ostensible incubator of democratic values and practice. This civil society confronted the dual challenge of managing the democratization process and securing the transition, while simultaneously functioning as a political agent deeply embroiled in the political conflict. In this context, I highlight the role of civil society organizations in thwarting the democratic transition.

Exceptionalism and the Tunisian Exception: Deconstructing the Myth

The failure of the Tunisian revolution is neither unique nor rare in modern political history. Many revolutions and democratic transitions had similar, if not worse, outcomes. As scholars often emphasize, democratic transitions rarely follow a linear path. Instead, they typically unfold along winding trajectories and often stumble. At times, revolutions end up where they began, culminating in the inescapable resurgence of tyranny in various forms. The French Revolution is the example *par excellence* of such contradictory – as well as thrilling, strange, and disappointing – outcomes. All these fates are contained within it, for both its supporters and opponents, and it has left political scientists and historians perplexed for generations.[5] In such complex and entangled processes, national specificities – political culture, the character of actors and elites, and entrenched social forces like the social classes and political formations that sustained the *ancien régime* – have a profound impact on the historical outcomes of societal change or political transition. They influence alliances, guide the trajectory of events, and define pivotal turning points, imbuing them with their lexicons and perceptions. Many analyses, and even political theories, take this broadly sketched framework when explaining revolutions and transitions, though they acknowledge that exceptions exist. For nearly a decade, the Tunisian revolution reinforced the paradigm of Tunisian exceptionalism.[6] Numerous scholars and experts saw Tunisia's success as a manifestation of this exceptionalism, so extraordinary within an Arab-Islamic environment long marked by failed attempts at democratic transition.

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[4] Was the democratic transition democratizing? What was the place of democracy in it? Answers to these questions have varied, particularly that some observers believe that democratic values and culture were atrophied, which led political initiatives to prioritize governance and gain power at the expense of consolidating democracy in educational curricula, culture, and institutions. Two important sources enrich a consideration of this question, each taking a different perspective and treating a different time. See: Vincent Geisser & Amin Allal, *Tunisie, Une démocratisation au–dessus de tout soupçon* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2018); Ghassane Salame, *Démocraties sans démocrates: Politiques d'ouverture dans le monde arabe et islamique* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), pp. 142-143.

[5] See: Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (London: Harvard University Press, 1986); Michel Camau, *L'exception Tunisienne: Variation sur un mythe* (Paris: IRMC, Karthala, 2018).

[6] See: Michel Camau & Vincent Geisser, *Le syndrome autoritaire: Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003).

In keeping with the critical approach outlined above, we must return to the historical roots of the idea of exceptionalism, as formulated by Alexis de Tocqueville in his excursus on the peculiar qualities of the American democratic experiment.[7] Tocqueville regarded the American iteration of democracy as one-of-a-kind, the product of a local, idiosyncratic history shaped by waves of immigration since the 17th century by diverse groups seeking "a land of justice and goodness". He emphasized this particularity, viewing American history and the social engineering that underpinned it, the ways of thinking and living, the reactions shaped through socialization and daily conduct, the structure of local governance, and the unleashing of individual initiative, as features that distinguished Americans and rendered their political life and pioneering democracy unique. Indeed, Tocqueville considered the United States as the only democracy in existence during his time.

I explicitly exclude what first comes to mind when "state of exception" is invoked. Since the writings of Carl Schmitt, the concept in political science has come to denote a temporary – though potentially prolonged – suspension of the constitution, laws, and legislation that govern political life. While this meaning is important for understanding the outcomes of the Tunisian democratic transition, an exception (or exceptionalism) as used in this study refers to the unique characteristics of societies that are attributable to singular, essential traits that put them outside the norm. Exceptionalism in this sense has been elaborated within the social sciences and anthropology, where some civilizations, societies, and faiths have been cast as sources of exception. Islam, for example, has often been viewed as an impediment to the spread of democratic values in the countries that embraced it.

As used here, Tunisian exceptionalism refers to the idea that Tunisian society is unique in its cultural and political history; it is history that has rendered Tunisia an exception. This paradigm of exceptionalism was cited extensively before the Arab revolutions of 2010-2011 to understand the region's ostensible imperviousness to democratization. The Arab exception, which posits that Arab countries are congenitally unsuited to democracy, rests on the premise that European and American democratic models represent the norm, and that any deviations from these models are mere exceptions whose genuine democratic nature remains suspect.[8]

In the post-revolutionary phase in Tunisia, beginning in late 2010 and early 2011, the idea of a Tunisian exception was rediscovered and valorized to explain the success of the country's democratic transition. In line with this approach, Tunisian exceptionalism became a historical fact and an unassailable proof during the transitional phase in 2012 and 2013 and beyond. Tunisia was a "beacon"[9] in the darkness that had descended upon most other Arab states such as Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria.

For its proponents, Tunisian exceptionalism rests on a set of arguments, many of which were cited in the pre-revolutionary period as evidence of its exceptionalism to the rule (i.e. the broader Arab context). These include the resilience of Tunisia's civil society, its long-standing constitutional heritage, the modernity and democracy of its political elites and their capacity for consensus, the breadth and enlightenment of its liberal middle class, its moderate Islamist movement, and its republican, non-politicized army.[10] Other arguments,

7   See: Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique, souvenirs: L'ancien régime et la révolution* (Paris: éd. Robert Laffont/Bouquins, 1986).

8   Michel Camau, "Globalisation démocratique et exception autoritaire arabe," *Critique internationale*, vol. 1, no. 30 (2006), pp. 59-81; Nicolas Guilhot & Philippe C. Schmitter, "De la transition à la consolidation: Une lecture rétrospective des democratization studies," *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 50, no. 4-5 (2000), pp. 615-632; Diane Ethier, "L'imposition de la démocratie a-t-elle été l'exception ou la règle depuis 1945?," *Études internationales*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2000), pp. 313-339; Alfred Stepan & Graeme Robertson, "An Arab More Than a Muslim Electoral Gap," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2003), pp. 30-59; Sanford Lakoff, "The Reality of Muslim Exceptionalism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2004), pp. 133-139; John Waterbury, "Democracy Without Democrats? The Potential for Political Liberalization in the Middle East," in: Ghassan Salame (ed.), *Democracy without Democrats: The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 23-47.

9   Yadh Ben Achour has examined some aspects of this exception; see: Yadh Ben Achour, *Tunis: Thawra fī Bilād al-Islām* (Tunis: Dar Saras, 2017).

10   Mohamed Nachi, *Socio-anthropologie des cultures arabo-islamiques, sociologie de la "révolution" tunisienne. L'exception tunisienne: Vers un "compromis historique?"* (Liège: Presse universitaire de liège, 2015).

which I have excluded from this analysis, contend that its exceptionalism stems from a "Tunisian genius" and a particularity deeply rooted in the ancient history of its people, even before they became Tunisians. These arguments lean more on myth than on history, with some even tracing Tunisian exceptionalism back over 3,000 years to the civilization of Carthage and its unique legacy.

Tunisia has been viewed as a double exception because its democratic transition culminated, albeit minimally, in the establishment of an actual democracy. Through numerous free elections, it achieved the peaceful transfer of power and, both in legislation and in practice, upheld the separation of powers, at least for a limited period. This resulted in a significant liberalization of the public sphere.[11] In addition – and of particular concern in this study – Tunisia stood out as the only Arab country to have successfully navigated its transition, in contrast to the failure of other Arab experiences, until outcomes subsequently changed.[12]

In keeping with this reverential view, Tunisia was often given a special status, embodied in the term "Tunisian exception". While Tunisian society endured various forms of authoritarianism under President Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987) and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), there were multiple signs that the country possessed the potential for a smooth transition to democracy, despite the regimes' lack of receptivity to any form of democratic openness. These indicators include political pluralism, a climate conducive to public freedoms (albeit limited), and an entrenched struggle for human rights.

The social modernization the country has undergone since the establishment of the independent state, the economic liberalism it has embraced since the 1970s, and the expansion of its diverse national economic fabric, as well as the growth of a middle class and a modern elite of university graduates, are socioeconomic indicators that, according to classical modernization theory, suggest it was "inevitable" that Tunisia enter the stage of democracy. In contrast, research and studies that reeled off these indicators denied their presence in other Arab countries. Tunisia was thus cast as an exception, uniquely combining all these attributes in a way unmatched elsewhere in the Arab world.

But the dream of democracy was never realized. In fact, the country experienced occasional, baffling setbacks after brief periods of democratic openness, which were limited both in duration and impact. Accordingly, the notion of the Tunisian exception, when measured against the broader Arab norm, seemed more like a historical paradox. Tunisia had seemingly met all the preconditions for democratization, most importantly a period of economic and social maturity presumed to be conducive to, and capable of embracing democracy.[13]

Though important, this thesis is far from enjoying scholarly consensus. Many scholars, such as Michel Camau, have sought to refute it by demonstrating the fallacy of Arab exceptionalism, particularly in a global context marked by the diffusion of democracy. In fact, some latch on to this context to argue that the Arab world remains an exception because it maintains, "strangely", various forms of authoritarianism.[14]

The truth, however, is that Arab authoritarianism is not an exception to the globalization of democracy. Citing the Arab world's failure to produce democratic systems often relies on treating it as a homogeneous unit composed of identical authoritarian regimes, which is inaccurate. Furthermore, there is no scientific

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[11] Other aspects of Tunisian exceptionalism have been explored in the writings of some Tunisian sociologists who theorize a Tunisian character with a set of specific traits. For Mahmud al-Dhawadi, for example, this character is "combative" and "unreconciled with its language" and religious symbols, while for Moncef Wanas, it is conciliatory and easily appeased. For both, this personality is distinct from that of other Arabs, based on the idea of a "base personality". This articulation of exceptionalism takes on a socio-anthropological dimension that is not subject to historical periodization or chronology and is quasi-essentialist. See: Moncef Wanas, *al-Shakhṣiyya al-Tūnisiyya: Muḥāwala fī Fahm al-Shakhṣiyya al-ʿArabiyya* (Tunis: al-Dar al-Mutawassita, 2010); Mahmud al-Dhawadi, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Tūnisī wa-Iḥtiḍānuhū li-Maʾziq al-Istilāb: Iʿāqat al-Lugha wa-Irtibāk al-Huwiyya* (Tunis: Mujamaʿ al-Atrash, 2019), p. 231.

[12] Nicolas Beau & Dominique Lagarde, *L'exception tunisienne. Chronique d'une transition démocratique mouvementée* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), p. 197.

[13] Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, "Développement et démocratie: L'exception tunisienne," *L'année du Maghreb*, no. 3 (2007), pp. 427-455.

[14] Camau, "Globalisation démocratique et exception autoritaire arabe," p. 59.

evidence that authoritarianism is inherently Arab, let alone an essential, fixed characteristic. As Camau contends, this belief is not only intellectually and morally flawed: it is a stigmatizing attitude, especially when authoritarianism is explicitly labelled as "Arab".

In contemporary political life, the norm is democracy or the pursuit thereof. The exception is authoritarianism, which has "no essential Arab origin". The idea of an Arab exception

> stems from a set of sociohistorical assumptions, similar to those that posit the existence of rigid, immutable social structures inclined toward authoritarianism, or a religious doctrine that endorses and justifies authoritarianism. The exception has nothing to do with Arabs; the enormous repressive capacities of Arab political regimes would not have been possible without the support of Western powers intent on securing their security interests, coupled with the weakness of popular resistance … Democracy is a norm shared by most Arab peoples, and they yearn for it, but in their own way, harbouring reservations about democracy being a Western evangelizing mission.[15]

Camau believes that the same applies to Tunisia, as I will discuss later, and ultimately asserts that there is no Tunisian exception. The dynamics of democratization and its failure are attributable to sociohistorical causes determined by a set of factors, such as the contexts and identity of elites and actors, their status and positions, and the strategies that produced those attitudes and practices.

How to Dismantle the Myth of Tunisian Exceptionalism?

An exception breaks a rule without completely negating it. A rule typically refers to a set of patterns that regularly recur whenever the same conditions and contexts exist.[16] Much research on the political situation in the Arab world emphasizes the region's ability to reproduce and perpetuate the same patterns, consistently demonstrating its inability to produce successful democratic experiments. This body of research concludes that the failure is neither incidental nor contingent, but structural and fixed. Regardless of variables, the rule is that an entrenched inwardness precludes any possibility of democracy.

This thesis seemed to be further buttressed by the early failure of the democratic transitions following the Arab Spring revolutions, most of which quickly devolved into civil war and widespread violence. In his analysis of the relationship between the rule and the exception, Azmi Bishara asserts that the "riddle of the exception", whether in Arab states or Tunisia specifically, resolves itself once we understand and analyse the various complex elements. As he writes: "Arab exceptionalism has nothing to do with the absence of conditions for democratization and everything to do with the presence of conditions for brutal authoritarianism, including the willingness to use maximum force and a complex interplay of external and regional factors".[17]

Analyses that rely on the idea of exceptionalism to explain social and political experiences like transitions often overlook the historical contexts and mechanisms that give rise to such idiosyncrasies, the competing social forces and their means of conflict resolution, and the various forms of arduous compromises and concessions. Exceptionalism, in this sense, spares us the effort of considering these complex issues and dimensions. After all, an exception is an extraordinary situation, a deviation from an order governed by precise rules that determine how things function and how they are categorized.

The pillars of Tunisian exceptionalism, however, remain deeply entrenched. It is supported by a set of arguments that confer upon it a degree of legitimacy, especially when viewed in contrast to the failure of other Arab revolutions. Some analysts thus attribute the success of the Tunisian revolution to the country's

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15 Ibid.

16 Ivan Ermakoff, "Epistemologie de l'exception," *Sociétés plurielles,* no. 1 (2017).

17 Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī: Dirāsa Naẓariyya wa-Taṭbīqiyya Muqārina* [*Democratic Transition: A Comparative Theoretical and Applied Study*] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 229-259.

venerable constitutional legacy, while others explain the delayed revolutions in other Arab states by pointing to the novelty – or complete absence – of their constitutional experience.[18]

Revolutions are epic affairs, and their disappointments or failures are the stuff of myth and legend. To understand the Tunisian revolution and its outcomes, it is therefore necessary[19] to demystify the narratives that have been embedded in the scholarly discourse around the revolution and the country's transition. As with all myths, the narratives they engender provide answers that quickly become axiomatic and unquestioned unless mainstream hypotheses are proposed and examined.

The way to conduct a demythologized analysis of the success of Tunisia's democratic transition is *not* to treat it as an exception to the rule. Rather, it should be approached as a historical experience with its own particularity and singularity, distinct from exceptionalism in the essentialist sense. An exceptionalist interpretation does not trace revolutions, transitions, and their outcomes back to contextual specificities that shaped them. Instead, it affirms an essentialism grounded in metahistorical qualities that demonstrate the intrinsic uniqueness of a people or nation. Certainly, analyses of democratic transitions have often acknowledged the particular conditions inventoried by Tunisia-specific analyses. I believe, however, that drawing more fine-tuned connections is necessary to understand the particularities. Generalization risks overlooking facts obscured by the encomiastic discourse that has persisted in Tunisian history since the mythologization of Bourguiba as an exceptional leader.

Numerous organizations lauded Tunisia's exceptional success story after 2011. Even rigorous scholarly writings were not immune to the allure of this mystique, though it gradually dissipated after the dissolution of parliament, the repeal of the 2014 Constitution, and the subsequent seizure of absolute power by Saied. These panegyrics incontestably inflated the importance of Tunisian exceptionalism, often attributing it to the same factors (which are questionable in the first place) championed by the Bourguibist narrative: a harmonious society, universal education, a middle class, civil society, emancipated women, and so on, as Camau has argued.[20] Yet, as we pause at the roles played by actors who contributed to the thwarting of the experiment, we may be spurred to the antithesis of glorification.

Deconstructing the notion of the Tunisian exception first requires abandoning its mythology and approaching the constituent elements of the Tunisian revolution and the subsequent democratic transition as a historical experience shaped by the interplay of various success factors. My focus in this paper is limited to the myth of civil society, which serves as a useful lens to assess the solidity of other arguments for exceptionalism, for instance, the role of Tunisian elites, the long-standing constitutional heritage, and so on. The civil society thesis is a fitting choice, as it is grounded in the assumption that Tunisian exceptionalism was manifest during the democratic transition. Civil society brought together many Tunisian political and civic leaders, played a decisive role in key turning points and milestones of the transition,[21] and was central to the positions, analyses, and practices adopted by Tunisian political elites during the transitional process.

Moreover, civil society played a key role in drafting the 2014 Constitution and building constitutional institutions. It capitalized on the transitional climate and the struggle to guide its outcomes, while, in my view, clearly being alert to all the practices that facilitated the collapse of the experiment. This community benefited from a climate of freedoms and liberal, open-minded laws,[22] under which it witnessed tremendous quantitative growth. Political and civil elites – including civil society elites themselves – assigned it multiple

[18] Choukri Hmed, "Au-delà de l'exception tunisienne: Les failles et les risques du processus révolutionnaire," *Pouvoirs*, vol. 156 (2016), pp. 137-147.

[19] Camau, *L'exception tunisienne*, pp. 14-16.

[20] Ibid., p. 22.

[21] Hammadi Redessi (ed.), *La transition bloquée* (Tunis: Diwen Edition, 2021).

[22] Rafaâ Ben Achour & Sana Ben Achour, "La transition démocratique en Tunisie: Entre légalité constitutionnelle et légitimité révolutionnaire," *Revue française de droit constitutionnel*, vol. 4, no. 92 (2012), pp. 715-732.

roles, most notably, at least symbolically, the task of preventing the country from spiralling into civil violence and of "preserving the gains of modernity".[23]

The Role of Tunisian Civil Society in the Democratic Transition

Most democratic transitions have relied on civil society, which plays an indispensable role as an incubator for democratic and civic practices. However, in many other cases, it has contributed to the failure of the transition and exacerbated the internal conflicts that have engulfed societies. In some instances, civil society has disrupted transitions, and its various formations or components, such as associations, clubs, bodies, elites, and alliances, have been implicated in civil wars. To understand these complex and contradictory roles, it is necessary to abandon the "church of civil society": the vision of civil society as a sacrosanct entity or a magic wand capable of resolving all dilemmas, while ignoring the complexity of issues, the importance of contexts, and the strategies, attitudes, and positions of the various actors involved.

Civil society remains conceptually vague, but two major approaches stand out in efforts to define it and assess its significance. The first defines civil society in opposition to the state and sometimes even to the government, drawing clear boundaries between the two. In this view, civil society is the space encompassing associations and institutions like families, businesses, organizations, and associations, that facilitate the meeting of individuals to pursue their shared goals and projects independent of the state. The second approach is more cautious about establishing such a dichotomy, acknowledging the overlaps between the public and private spheres. It recognizes that, just as the state needs civil society, the latter requires government, law, and the state through legislation, oversight, funding, and operation.[24]

When employed in analysis, the concept of civil society entails significant theoretical complexity, even when it comes to Western European societies. Beginning in the 18th century, and for decades thereafter, civil society was viewed as synonymous with the state, particularly in social contract theories. By the late 19th century, however, this meaning gradually evolved and civil society came to be viewed as distinct from – and often in tension with – the state, defending an independent space for individuals and groups. This understanding remains popular today, emphasizing a space "in the form of civic associations and institutions operating in the public sphere, outside the state and the economy. … Civil society as we mean it today evolves within this order, becoming a public sphere within the state in its broadest sense and a sphere independent of the state in its narrowest sense". Despite the importance of these distinctions, emphasis on the role of civil society in democracy and democratic transitions has emerged only recently.[25]

Civil society, especially in Western societies and specifically in the urban spaces arising from the ashes of feudalism, encompassed new social classes striving to carve out their own space, free from the pressures and strict controls of feudal society. This is the historical context in which the concept of individual and collective freedoms emerged, and which would later be gradually codified. From its earliest stages, civil society functioned as a space of liberation, linked to the emergence of the bourgeoisie and its moral and social traditions. It became a sphere of independence for new actors and included various associations:

[23]   Mohamed Zied Chamsi, "Consensus et démocratie en Tunisie," PhD dissertation in law, jointly supervised by Cote d'Azur University and Sousse University (Tunisia), Centre for Studies and Research in Administrative, Constitutional, Financial, and Fiscal Law (Nice), 22 December 2023; Hédia Brik Mokni, "L'exercice des libertés politiques en période de transition démocratique. Cas de la Tunisie," PhD dissertation, DESPEG, CERDACFF research unit, Cote d'Azur University, 7 September 2016.

[24]   François Rangon, "Société civile: Histoire d'un mot," in: Jacques Chevallier, François Rangeon & Philippe Dupire (eds.), *La société civile, [Texte imprimé]: [Rapports du colloque]/ [Organisé par le] Centre universitaire de recherches administratives et politiques de Picardie, [Amiens, 25 octobre 1985]* (Paris: P. U. F., 1986), p. 9.

[25]   Azmi Bishara, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī: Dirāsa Naqdiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2018), p. 66.

organizations, parties, and movements that operated within the public sphere. These social forces sought to maintain their independence from the hegemony of the formal political sphere, pushing the state to recognize their presence and consult them. Over time, in various contexts, they compelled the state to take their views into account, and, indeed, were able to influence the official political sphere.

If the bourgeoisie was the decisive factor behind the emergence of civil society in Western Europe, then the intelligentsia and elites more broadly have played a similarly formative role in its development elsewhere in Europe and beyond. In the democratic transitions of Eastern Europe, such as in Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, the role of civil society was determined by the capacity of democratic forces, particularly elites, to mobilize effectively in contexts where the state respected the public sphere and allowed for civil society's autonomy. Civil society's impact was also contingent on its ability to reshape itself and instil democratic values within its constituent components.[26]

To understand the position and roles of civil society during periods of democratic transition, and specifically in the Tunisian experience, I lean toward the first definition, provided that we expand beyond such components as associations and organizations and include forums, collective initiatives, and even some social movements. These actors often formed close alliances with entities both within and outside civil society, including political parties. New entities and methods of activity emerged, such as coordinating bodies, forums, and initiatives. These are issues to which we will return below, especially as they reflect civil society's capacity for innovation and self-organization during this period. Indeed, at times, civil society seemed to operate entirely outside the state.

During the revolution and subsequent democratic transition, civil society in Tunisia acquired such stature that, at times, its leverage undermined the state and surpassed its authority. This prompted calls to restore the prestige or stature of the state (*haybat al-dawla*), a theme that featured prominently in the political agenda of figures like President Beji Caid Essebsi (2014-2019). The demand, implicitly rejecting the period of Ennahda's governance, intensified with the rise of the Nidaa Tounes party in 2014.[27] President Saied later used the same slogan to call for the elimination of all "mediating bodies", including civil society groups and non-governmental organizations, as imminent threats to the unity of the state.[28]

Civil society has played multiple roles in democratic transitions, perhaps most importantly shaping the public sphere and preparing it for citizen participation, expanding the scope of freedoms and rights, fostering democratic values, and integrating new social groups into the transition. Nevertheless, a set of complex issues is often overlooked, chief among them the nature of civil society itself and the extent of its own democracy, the contradictions that divide it, the relations of dominance within it, and its relationship with the political community. These issues typically determine the outcomes of the democratic transition itself.[29]

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[26] Michael Bernhard, "Civil Society and Democratic Transition," *East Central Europe: Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 108, no. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 307-326.

[27] The Tunisian political literature does not offer a precise meaning for "state prestige", but it generally refers to the restoration of state authority after a period in which its ability to carry out its decisions and compel citizens to comply with them has been compromised. It refers to the state's ability to command a greater measure of fear, respect, and appreciation. In revolutionary contexts, it indicates a significant degree of veneration for state symbols, specifically its senior officials, and obedience to their orders. In this sense, "state prestige" has begun to assume serious concrete dimensions that threaten public and even individual freedoms, especially with the issuance on Law 54/2022. See: "Law 54/2022 of 13 September 2022 on the suppression of crimes involving information and communications systems," Dcaf – Centre for Security Sector Governance, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/tk448kah

[28] A key slogan in Beji Caid Essebsi's 2014 presidential campaign was the restoration of the stature of the state, which had been weakened and had lost authority vis-à-vis protest movements and a strong civil society. The security vacuum, too, fostered a climate conducive to challenging the state and disobeying its authority. President Kais Saied, for his part, implicitly viewed civil society as a competitor of the state, a factor that weakened it, and a barrier to the extension of state authority. He thus adopted adversarial positions toward associations and organizations. For more, see: *Azmat al-Ajsām al-Wasīṭa: Dirāsāt fī al-Ḥāla al-Tūnisiyya* (Tunis: Centre for Strategic Studies on Arab North Africa, 2023).

[29] IDES Research Group, "Société civile et démocratisation: Une étude comparative au nord et au sud," *Revue Tiers Monde*, vol. 2, no. 178 (2004), pp. 443-464.

Since its establishment,[30] Tunisia's independent Supreme Authority for the Realization of the Revolution's Objectives, Democratic Transition, and Political Reform sought to liberate the public sphere, seen as essential for the formation of civil society and the launch of civic initiatives. One of its earliest acts was the issuance of the civic associations law,[31] a milestone in the development of post-revolution Tunisian civil society. The law eliminated Ministry of Interior and broader government control over the establishment of associations and NGOs. No longer requiring a prior permit, associations could be created through a simple notification process. This ended executive interference and transferred jurisdiction to the courts in cases of legal violations.

In addition to facilitating fundraising, including access to foreign funding and programmes to support the administrative capacities of association staff, the law sparked a proliferation of civic associations operating in numerous fields: rights and liberties, development, social and charitable services, women, youth, vulnerable groups, and racial and ethnic minorities. These associations benefited from limited public funding and far more extensive foreign funding, which played a tangible role in steering the agendas that subsequently determined civil society's activities and struggles.

The remarkable proliferation of civic associations[32] required financial and administrative expertise to attract donors and to design and implement projects aligned with precise objectives and conditions. However, this growth did not take place in isolation from political society and its conflicts and intense rivalries. As a result, civil society was unable to build its own stronghold and maintain its independence, thus failing to insulate itself from many of the dysfunctions that plagued political society.

The growth in the number of associations, whose activities were very broad, coupled with the political stakes for both civil society and political actors, transformed civil society into a vast arena for conflict and, occasionally, violent struggle. This unfolded against the backdrop of a shifting civic landscape. Some associations and organizations began operating as consultancies, completing numerous studies within short timeframes by recruiting academic researchers for their staff or scientific councils, a condition sometimes imposed by funders. Others morphed into "protest minorities" highly capable of disruption, while still others employed de-escalation, conflict avoidance, and mediation skills to resolve volatile social issues when the political community failed to do so.

The mining basin,[33] for example, stands as a key site where several organizations, including the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LTDH), and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), were transformed into mediators between the authorities on the one hand, and protesters, angry citizens, and sit-in participants on the other. Through these new roles, many of these organizations amassed significant symbolic capital, gaining prestige and legitimacy. In some instances, this meant the ejection of the state from crucial spaces and the erosion of its legitimacy. It also entailed an extortionary dynamic in which the state was compelled to return favours (*le contre-don*), alongside the formation of a civic patronage machine that flourished within and around civil society.[34] Armed with capacities, resources, knowledge, and skills, civil society imposed itself across most

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[30] The authority was created a few weeks after the fall of the Ben Ali regime pursuant to Presidential Decree 6/2011. See: "Presidential Decree 6/2011 issued on 18 February 2011 on the Supreme Body to Accomplish the Revolution Goals, Political Reforms, and Democratic Transition," Dcaf – Centre for Security Sector Governance, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: https://urls.fr/wb25Ru

[31] "Law 88/2011 dated 24 September 2011 on Assemblies Organization," Dcaf – Centre for Security Sector Governance, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: https://urls.fr/uOGNy

[32] There are an estimated 25,048 civic associations in operation. See: Centre for Information, Training, Studies, and Documentation on Associations, accessed on 26/8/2024, at: https://tinyurl.com/2xx74hjf

[33] Tunisia's mining basin, which produces some 95% of the country's phosphate, experienced near total paralysis during the decade-long transition, at significant financial cost to the country. Strikes and protests in the region, which entailed the destruction of equipment, received the unconditional support of civil society, particularly the UGTT and the LTDH.

[34] Some people broke with associations and organizations that developed a bad reputation due to luxury hotel meetings, paid junkets, and cronyism.

political arenas: from the constitution to draft laws, development plans,[35] local decisions, and ministerial programmes. It often acquired decision-making authority, appointing and dismissing officials, directing public funding, dictating priorities and development projects, and even influencing prosecutions, particularly through the use of knowledge accumulated in empowerment training programs.

Civil society practices became an obstacle to the establishment of ground rules for political actors. The parameters of the political calculus were unclear, especially since civil society was an uncontrolled variable that could not be accounted for based on the rules of political action. Despite this, the enterprising spirit of Tunisian civil society continued to captivate scholars, some of whom considered it a decisive factor explaining Tunisian exceptionalism. This was not new; it dates back to the 1980s. In a chapter devoted to the new state and the emergence of civil society, Muhammad Abd al-Baqi al-Harmasi traced the formal birth of civil society in Tunisia to the 1970s, following two decades of the haphazard "state-ification" of society. The state's failure to resolve acute economic and social problems fostered an environment conducive to the emergence of a civil society that sought to end state dominance, capitalizing on the frustration of post-independence aspirations. For him, this marked the beginning of a firmly rooted heritage of civil society.[36]

Some scholars push this origin further back, noting that modernization in the early 20th century, even before the formation of the Tunisian nation-state, spurred the formation of associations, parties, and unions that defended marginalized groups such as workers, women, and the needy. These writings point to Tunisia's first labour union, formed in the 1920s,[37] followed by the first human rights association in the Arab and African worlds in the 1970s.

Tunisian civil society incontestably helped the country avert deeper tensions and resentment following the assassinations of 2013[38] by bringing together various factions in a national dialogue, for which it received the Nobel Peace Prize. Nevertheless, these epic achievements masked fatal flaws, including sharp internal divisions and political manipulations. It is no exaggeration to say that civil society became an extension of political parties, especially amid repeated and intense episodes of polarization. It also reproduced and fuelled polarization, adopting double standards on several issues and, in many cases, abandoning its core principles of citizen equality and partisan neutrality.[39]

Despite its shortcomings, there is no denying that civil society achieved numerous gains between 2011 and 2021, significantly expanding the scope of individual and collective freedoms. However, many civil society practices that became widespread ultimately derailed the democratic experiment. Civil society split into two camps in the first weeks after the regime's collapse, reproducing, with clear political implications, the deep divisions that had plagued Tunisian society since the 1970s: one, a "leftist" civil society presenting itself as the voice of modernity, enlightenment, and democracy; the other, a conservative civil society presenting itself as the guardian of national identity and authentic values.[40]

When acts of terrorism erupted, the second type of civil society faced prosecution for alleged links to terrorism financing, leading to the closure of numerous associations as terrorist groups were dismantled.

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[35] Hatem Kahloun, "La société civile tunisienne à l'épreuve de la participation: Mobilisation, pression et compromis autour des projets de développement urbain," *Insaniyat*, no. 90 (2020), pp. 99-120.

[36] Muhammad Abd al-Baqi al-Harmasi, *al-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Dawla fī al-Maghrib al-ʿArabī* (Beirut: CAUS, 1987), p. 133.

[37] For more details, see: Karay al-Qasantini, *al-Jamʿiyyāt bayn al-Taʾṭīr wa-l-Tawẓīf* (Tunis: Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Manouba, 2009).

[38] It is widely believed that the Quartet (UGTT, LTDH, the Tunisian Bar Association, and the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts) sponsored the 2013 national dialogue and so prevented the country's slide into civil war. This idea has been widely disseminated by Tunisian and international media and political discourse that implicitly argues for the inflation, and even mythologization, of the Quartet's role, particularly when these discourses invoke this as the reason that the Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

[39] Some analyses of the cleavage in civil society trace it to the early independence era, when all organizations and associations with some cultural or social ties to the old regime were abolished under the influence of modernization and the ideology of power. The rift was also manifested in the measures that abolished the system of Islamic endowments and suspended the activities of all associations and organizations with the word "Islamic" or "Muslim" in their names, including women's associations and most charitable associations.

[40] Kahloun.

Leftist civil society, in turn, benefited greatly from this shift, expanding into what appeared to be the sole authority on many issues. The country reverted to a single, unitary civil society, and diversity disappeared in activities and programmes specific to women, youth, and the media. The Tunisian democratic transition thus featured a dual-headed civil society locked in internal conflict, only to culminate in a homogenized civil society that contracted after the 2021 coup.

In many respects, civil society operated through open alliances between associations and organizations on one hand, and (particularly leftist) parties excluded from power through elections on the other. At times, the boundary between civil society (associations and organizations) and political society (parties and organizations) was virtually indistinguishable. During the transition, civil society members and their affiliates, supporters, and backers, devised new political practices to counter their rival, the Ennahda Movement. These efforts were implemented through coordinating bodies that brought together political parties, associations, organizations, and national figures. Known by various names, including "initiatives", these bodies went beyond merely challenging the political decisions and projects of successive governments, and also engaged in electoral politics. In addition, they staked out positions on the national dialogue, the constitution, elections, and even the stances of foreign countries. Through these associations and organizations, a broad spectrum of the Tunisian left embedded itself in civil society, using it as a platform to reopen political fronts and compensate for its poor electoral performance, such as in the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections, where the left collectively secured less than 1% of the seats in the House of Representatives.

The Role of Civil Society in Thwarting the Democratic Transition

During the war that engulfed several Balkan states in the early 1990s, a number of Serbian intellectuals, along with associations and NGOs, supported President Slobodan Milošević (1991-1997), justifying his atrocities and portraying him as a national hero defending values worthy of their support. Some had no qualms about associating themselves with his violations, while others struggled to defend democratic values, rights, and freedoms.[41] In other cases, civil society has fuelled social polarization to the point of threatening widespread sectarian, ethnic, religious, or political violence. In numerous contexts, civil society has proven hostile to democracy and the upheavals it entails. In his assessment of civil society in Africa, Michael Edwards emphasized a puzzling fact: "Internally, it is clear that civil society is not always a source of support for democracy and peace".[42]

Robert Putnam's idealized portrayal of a healthy civil society as the key to democracy, shaping the climate most conducive to the development of its norms and practices, and fostering mutual trust, solidarity, and values of tolerance and pluralism, has continued to inspire scholarly analyses of the roles of elites and civil society.[43] In contrast, John Keane, drawing on cases in which civil society was implicated in ethnic cleansing, violence, and xenophobia, asserted: "All known forms of civil society are plagued by endogenous sources of incivility".[44] Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, much of civil society in Eastern European countries retreated and was confined to "religious and sectarian enclaves".[45] This development bears strong resemblance to the Tunisian case, where a "religious" civil society emerged, composed of associations and organizations focused on charitable work and religious advocacy.

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[41] Roberto Belloni, "Civil Society in War-to-Democratic Transitions," in: Anna K. Jarstad & Timothy D. Sisk (eds.), *From War to Democracy: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 182-210.

[42] Michael Edwards, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī: al-Naẓariyya wa-l-Mumārasa*, Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Qadir Shahin (trans.) (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), p. 66.

[43] Robert. D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 43.

[44] Cited in Belloni, p. 187.

[45] Gediminas Lankauskas, "Société civile religieuse et 'effondrement moral' de la nation lituanienne," *Anthropologie et Sociétés*, vol. 32, no. 1-2 (2008), pp. 173-191.

These caveats about the nature of civil society should be borne in mind. Tunisian civil society, through practices that took root during the transitional period, reinforced the societal divide, until alarmingly profound fractures threatened civil war – not so different from what occurred in other Arab countries just weeks after their revolutions. The Tunisian experience of democratic transition thus reveals a deeply divided, partisan, and dogmatic civil society with a tenuous democratic culture. During the transition, it expanded as the state weakened, relinquishing some of its functions and proving incapable of fulfilling others. If Tunisia had previously suffered from the state's dominance over society,[46] in the post-revolution period it suffered from civil society's encroachment upon, harassment of, and even curtailment of the state. Genuine fear emerged for the state itself, given the growth of supra- and sub-national tendencies and the ferocity of terrorist groups that exhausted and damaged the state apparatus.

In democratic transitions, and even in established democracies, elections serve to structure the political community to build a political hierarchy among the various parties, which can then be translated into binding rules for political action. In Tunisia, however, the common rules in democracies were disregarded. Actors from outside the political sphere, notably civil society organizations, groups, and activists, emerged as powerful players with a remarkable ability to disrupt political life. This effectively rigged the political game, which began to operate under rules that deviated from core democratic practice based on election results and the weight they confer.

While electoral winners expected reactions from the political opposition, they did not anticipate the opposition of civil society, which was often fiercer than that of opposition parties themselves. In many instances, political forces that lost at the ballot box aligned themselves with a civil society that won politically, with the latter acting as a proxy opposition on behalf of its political allies. This inversion of roles precluded the establishment of political rules essential for binding consensus among voters and political actors. The proliferation of coordinating bodies and coalitions attested to this dynamic. Many political parties waged their political and ideological battles under cover of civil society, and leftist parties ultimately transformed civil society into a fortress hostile to alternative ideological and political convictions. Identity-based exclusion was rampant within civil society and extended beyond Ennahda or any other party. The flurry of competing statements and internal conflicts within prominent associations and organizations reflected a broader sectarian culture.[47]

Before the revolution, associations and organizations were reluctant to partner with political parties, emphasizing their independence. However, during the democratic transition and amid escalating political polarization between the two major camps, numerous attempts were made, finally in vain, to mitigate the unchecked antagonism between political parties and associations to confront those who governed during this period. According to Hatem Nafti,[48] civil society was hollowed out – emptied of its commitment to civil democratic struggle – through prolonged attrition, distracted by ideological battles waged for the benefit of political parties.

Larry Diamond argues that civil society's role in democratic transition should focus on fostering a political environment where all actors learn from one other, and where mistakes are seen as opportunities

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[46] al-Harmasi, p. 133.

[47] The LTDH exemplifies an association that political parties vie to control and exploit in line with their own partisan visions and priorities. After its conference in October 2016, the LTDH saw a wave of defections that nearly paralyzed the organization after the Workers' Party and the Democratic Patriots Party were accused of dominating it. This spurred some members to leave the association, including Vice-President Messaoud Romdhani, who resigned on 9 December. See: "Nāʾib Raʾīs al-Rābiṭa al-Tūnisiyya li-l-Difāʿ ʿan Ḥuqūq al-Insān Masʿād al-Ramaḍānī Yuʿlin Istiqālatahu," *Jomhouria*, 9/12/2016, accessed on 12/6/2024, at: https://bit.ly/3RXMvl:h. The General Union of Tunisian Students is another case in point. As a result of persistent internal conflicts, it saw, in recent years, the concurrent leadership of two secretaries-general, each vying for legitimacy – a conflict that undermined its influence and ability to mobilize students to defend their causes. "Sectarianism", as I use it here, refers to political behaviour that privileges the special interests of political groups within civic or mass organizations, overtly or covertly, over the collective interest, which should ostensibly prevail.

[48] Hatem Nafti, *Tunisie: Vers un populisme autoritaire* (Paris: Riveneuve, 2022).

to further consolidate democracy.[49] This, however, does not apply to Tunisian civil society during its transition, and historical evidence indicates this is no accident. From its early beginnings in the waning years of Bourguiba's rule and throughout the entirety of Ben Ali's rule – a period spanning over five decades – civil society was a refuge for leftist political currents in particular. These groups were among the first to intensively engage in the public sphere emerging under the shadow of the single-party system and the security and judicial persecution of leftist political opposition.

Civil society associations and organizations, even those established by secular liberals, provided a space in which leftist political currents thrived as they fought the political and human rights battles that they could not wage under the banner of their parties. Left-leaning civil society in Tunisia took shape in the 1970s amid a climate of fear and persecution that targeted politicians affiliated with underground parties and organizations. Stealth thus became central to its political culture and practice. The small number of civil society associations in that era represented a haven and strategic option for these secret organizations, which managed to infiltrate the former and thus operate openly. For these activists, independence meant, above all, independence from the ruling party, whose members were forbidden from joining them by various means including violence. As a result, the highest steering bodies of the LTDH, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), and the UGTT had no members affiliated with the ruling party, except in rare cases that occurred at the time of foundation or were resolved during an acute crisis with the regime. After the revolution, however, this separation became increasingly blurred. It was no longer unusual to find leaders of these associations declaring their partisan affiliation; they even ran for elections on lists that tacitly expressed their parties' positions.[50]

Much of civil society was not engaged in democratic struggles before the revolution due to the steep political cost imposed by the authoritarian police regime. For three decades the UGTT, for example, remained silent in the face of human rights-related, legal, and constitutional violations under Ben Ali that affected elites across the political spectrum. Instead, it focused on securing the social demands of its working- and middle-class constituents. It was a partner in the social peace embedded in a broader socio-political contract. Periodic negotiations typically resulted in quasi-automatic wage increases, with the amounts determined by expert committees from both the UGTT and the government, further consolidating the social peace.

However, rapidly changing political dynamics at the climax of the revolution compelled the UGTT to abandon its longstanding defensive silence. Once it joined, it actively fuelled the revolution and soon came upon a decisive point of no return. After the revolution, the union challenged the rule of the Islamists and their allies. Under the slogan of "regaining its national role", it waged what it called a "war of attrition" by launching an unprecedented series of strikes that debilitated the economy and the state's ability to manage the acute social crisis. As former UGTT Secretary-General Houcine Abassi admitted: "We never let Ennahda catch its breath".[51]

The LTDH was similarly criticized for its selective defence of victims, ignoring Islamists' plight under the Ben Ali regime. While the revolution revitalized the organization, after the July coup it remained reluctant to defend dissidents, particularly former government officials and the opposition figures during the transitional decade.

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[49]   Larry Jay Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2008), pp. 4-17.

[50]   During the internal electoral conferences of the LTDH, the National Bar Association, and the UGTT (for the latter, especially elections in the major sectoral unions for education, transportation, and health), the influence of parties can be gauged by the number of seats they win on internal leadership bodies.

[51]   "Amīn ʿĀmm al-Ittiḥād Yaʿtarif: Lam Natruk al-Islāmiyyīn Yartāḥūn!," *Meem Magazine*, YouTube, 2/5/2023, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/3xPlfyt

Reflecting similar sectarian attitudes, the ATFD engaged in bitter conflicts with Islamists after the revolution, flooding the feminist political and civic landscape with endless demands and protests. Its radical feminist campaign was part of the strategies adopted by civil society during the transitional decade to thwart and exhaust the government. While the political left and its deployment of organizations to open new opposition fronts against the new rulers (Islamists and their allies), Islamists pragmatically turned to charitable organizations, hoping it would yield electoral gains. However, their charitable work soon came under suspicion, and they were accused of accepting foreign funding, financing terrorism, and engaging in money laundering to support political operations.

Regardless of the accuracy of such allegations, broad swathes of the public, under the influence of the media, came to believe these activities were indeed happening and widespread. Perceptions hardened into convictions, and following the July coup, Islamists lost their already weak and inexperienced civil society infrastructure, which was rapidly dismantled. In contrast, leftist civil society, taking advantage of the gradual disappearance of its opponent, rallied behind President Saied in the lead-up to the coup. Numerous statements supporting Saied's measures were issued, with occasional hints of the need to restrict the president's authority, return to the constitutional path, and set a timeline for ending exceptional measures.

The climate of frustration and disappointment served as an incubator for civil society movements. Young people, frustrated by the meagre economic and social returns on the democratic transition, joined social protest movements that freed them from hierarchical party structures, discipline, prudence, and all the organizational rituals and routines. These movements provided a space for youth to express their frustrations, exert pressure, and protest, but they were not immune to manipulation, especially when leftist civil society allied with these movements.

As many civil society activists morphed into the leaders of these movements, an organic alliance emerged between the opposition, protest movements, and civil society. The alliance took institutional form in various initiatives and coalitions, often characterized by revolving-door coordinating committees that acted in tandem to exhaust those in government. The disappearance of protest movements after the 25 July coup suggests that their demands and the "noble causes" they championed over the previous decade, such as unemployment, regional inequality, violence against women, and police abuses, were not the sole or objective drivers of their fierce mobilizations. These issues acquired even greater salience after the coup. Yet movements like *Manish Mesameh* (I Will Not Forgive), *Wein al-Betrol?* (Where's the Oil?), and *al-Kamour*[52] have disappeared.

Pointing to the enervation of civil society after 25 July,[53] Hatem Nafti writes that it was "an indispensable actor during the decade of 2011-2021, but it witnessed a sharp division following the approach taken by Kais Saied. It suffices to point to three cases that bear witness to this: the Tunisian General Labor Union, the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights, and social movements".[54] For similar reasons, civil society was not opposed to Saied's actions when he announced his coup; its reaction was, in fact, mostly lacklustre. Many associations and organizations expressed understanding of the measures taken, especially given the muddled positions of the UGTT, the LTDH, and the Bar Association, which hoped to be involved in managing the "corrective" phase. Civil society's failure to preserve and protect the transition discredits its image as a bulwark against any deviation from or reversal of the transition.

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[52] Al-Kamour was a protest movement that emerged in the far south of Tunisia (the Kamour region, Tataouine) to defend the region's rights to petroleum resources. After managing to shut down the oil fields for a prolonged period, it disappeared when Saied rose to power in 2019 and many of the movement's leaders became supporters of the president.

[53] Numerous protest movement leaders became supporters of President Saied, either after the 2019 elections or the coup of 25 July 2021.

[54] Nafti, p. 279.

Following the July coup, several civil society organizations rushed to support Saied, urging him to proceed with his "political project". While occasionally offering financial support, many channelled harsh criticisms at what they called the "Black Decade". Some 50 women and human rights organizations and associations, which were active during the transition in the form of a consultative force that was heeded by most governments, backed the coup. Yet, these same organizations had monopolized civil society under the banner of "modernity and civilization", ostensibly giving voice to the "aspirations of Tunisian society", and had reaped the benefits of the country's democratic transition: unconditional freedom, massive financial and logistical capacities, and an unprecedented media presence that enabled them to contribute to decision-making and form lobbying networks.

Conclusion

The democratic experiment in Tunisia has offered a valuable, if imperfect, classroom, one not free of mischief on part of students and teachers alike. But the hopes pinned on the transition were dashed when that classroom was shuttered and all involved were expelled. Tragically, the political actors in power misjudged and squandered the opportunity. Meanwhile, their opponents adopted strategies to exhaust and thwart them in the long term. Civil society continued to operate with the logic and reflexes of the pre-revolutionary era: stealth, attrition, and ideological siege. Its lexicon remained fixed, and its visions virtually unchanged. It failed to grasp the transformative potential of the democratic transition and the imperative of building consensus, cultivating shared convictions, and fostering political coexistence. Instead, it continued to view those who governed as illegitimate usurpers. Accordingly, civil society did not bridge the divide between rivals nor inculcate the values of democracy, pluralism, and coexistence in its members and the general public. On the contrary, it deepened the social rift that divided Tunisian society into two opposing camps. The social fabric, now torn apart by hatred and resentment, will be difficult to mend, which creates fertile ground for populism.

The failure of the democratic transition in Tunisia exposes the weak theoretical and procedural underpinnings of the Tunisian exception. Over the course of a decade, civil society, despite its celebrated image, proved not to be a reliable evidentiary pillar supporting the exceptionalism theory and its explanatory validity. My deconstruction of the myth of civil society has shown that the essentialist conceptions of Tunisian exceptionalism cannot grasp or explain the rapid collapse of the transition and the institutions, values, and legislation it produced. Drawing on a set of hypotheses, I examined the extent to which civil society actors fuelled conflicts and disputes and expanded exclusionary spaces, rendering it impossible to find common ground in a transitional context that demanded tolerance and coexistence.

For its part, political society, while it successfully forged political alliances among various actors, albeit fragile, neglected to build bridges with civil society. This sowed the seeds of the transition's eventual demise. Insofar as it culminated in a regime of authoritarian populism that dismantled the gains of the transition and returned the country to its pre-revolutionary starting point, the Tunisian democratic transition can hardly be considered exceptional.

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Rufei Li*

The Role of Urban Transformation in Saudi Arabia's Nation-building: The Case of al-Balad, Jeddah**

دور التحول الحضري في عمليات بناء الأمة في السعودية: المدينة التاريخية القديمة في جدة "البلد" نموذجًا

Abstract: The built environment of Jeddah's Historic District, known as *al-Balad*, has undergone significant transformations since the mid-19th century, shaped by several rounds of conservation. Drawing on fieldwork and existing scholarship, this article argues that the urban transformation of *al-Balad* is the outcome of state-building and nation-building processes in Saudi Arabia. In turn, *al-Balad*'s transformation has deeply impacted Saudi Arabia's nation-building. Although the rapid modernization and urbanization process sidelined serious efforts to conserve *al-Balad*, triggering profound changes in the district, the renewed emphasis on national identity and the rise of an indigenous "Saudi" culture in the early 21st century has repositioned *al-Balad* from a site of socio-economic changes into a source of cultural symbols.

Keywords: Jeddah; al-Balad; Saudi Culture; Nation-Building.

الملخص: مرّت جدة التاريخية، المعروفة أيضًا باسم "البلد"، بمراحل متعددة منذ منتصف القرن التاسع عشر من حيث البيئة الحضرية، وقوبلت بعدة جولات من جهود الحفاظ عليها. تجادل الدراسة، استنادًا إلى بحث ميداني وسبر للأدبيات السابقة، بأنّ عملية التحول الحضري لجدة البلد هي نتاج عمليتَي بناء الدولة وبناء الأمة، التي أثّرت في دور البلد في جدة في عملية بناء الأمة في المملكة العربية السعودية على نحو كبير. وعلى الرغم من أنّ عملية التحديث والتحضر سريعة الوتيرة قد أهملت الجهود الجادة للحفاظ على منطقة جدة التاريخيةِ؛ ما تسبب في تغييرات عميقة في المنطقة، فإنّ الحاجة إلى هوية وطنية ونشأة ثقافة «سعودية» أصلانية في القرن الجديد حوّلت المنطقة من متلقية للتغييرات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية إلى مانحة للرموز الثقافية.

كلمات مفتاحية: جدة؛ البلد؛ الثقافة السعودية؛ بناء الأمة.

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The Urban Transformation of Jeddah and Its Twofold Implications

Known as "the bride of the Red Sea" (ʿarūs al-baḥr al-aḥmar), the city of Jeddah has long stood as a commercial and intellectual hub. The city's Historic District, *al-Balad*, has served since Ottoman times, as a key transit for pilgrims and a prosperous hub of trade and commerce. As oil revenues began to rise drastically in the mid-1960s, Jeddah witnessed a surge in population and a subsequent expansion of its urban boundaries. Despite early calls for conservation by some intellectuals, officials, and urban planners who recognized the potential negative impact of this accelerated urbanization the old city centre sustained substantial damage in the last three decades of the 20th century. Aa cursory examination of the contemporary history of Jeddah reveals the extent to which *al-Balad* was neglected in terms of conservation amid the city's fast-paced expansion during this period.[1]

Following the ascension of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in 2015, the kingdom launched an ambitious scheme of national transition in 2016, branded "Vision 2030". Not only is the plan concerned with economic diversification, it also places emphasis on forging a "Saudi" national identity and a corresponding indigenous culture.[2] Within this new context, *al-Balad* was included in a new conservation plan. Under the auspices of the newly established Ministry of Culture, the "Historic Jeddah Revitalization Project" was introduced with a mandate to preserve and manage the district's "tangible and intangible heritage".[3]

While the project's goals and government support aligns with previous conservation plans dating back to the 1970s, the apparent consistency of these efforts stands in contrast to the physical decay of *al-Balad* – a contradiction that has drawn critical attention from international scholars.[4] Given *al-Balad*'s historical significance and cultural distinctiveness, two questions were of particular concern. First, how has *al-Balad* undergone physical and social transformation in modern times? Second, how does the new revitalization project differ from previous efforts, particularly in light of the project's emphasis on *al-Balad* as an integral component of Saudi national heritage?

A wide range of scholarly debates has addressed the history of Jeddah and the development of its urban fabric. In her analysis of Jeddah's history, Ulrike Freitag closely examines the exceptionality of Jeddah, arguing that the "Jeddawi" or "Hejazi" identity has retained its resilience despite the impact of rapid modernization. She also cast light upon the re-emergence of tensions between Hijazis and Najdis in 21st century Saudi Arabia, especially given the inter-regional disparity in terms of conserving architectural heritage.[5] Much scholarly attention to Jeddah's urban transition since the 1960s has focused on conservation efforts in *al-Balad*, with several works by Saudi scholars emphasizing the district's potential for cultural tourism.[6] Drawing on conservation plans, interviews, and local archives, Mohammed Bagader presents a thorough analysis of conservation policies in *al-Balad* and their impact on the built environment.[7]

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[1] For a contemporary record, see: Tawfiq M. Abu Ghazzeh, "Built Form and Religion: Underlying Structures of Jeddah Al-Qademah," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 49-59.

[2] On the rise of Saudi nationalism, see: Madawi Al-Rasheed, *The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 154-174. From the government's side, the establishment of the Ministry of Culture by dividing the old Ministry of Culture and Information and the former's task with releasing annual report on "the state of culture" demonstrates the kingdom's increased concern with this realm. See the 2019 and 2020 reports as examples: Ministry of Culture, *Report on the State of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019: Facts and Figures* (Riyadh, 2020); Ministry of Culture, *Taqrīr al-Ḥāla al-Thaqāfiyya fī al-Mamlaka al-ʿArabiyya al-Suʿūdiyya 2020: Raqmanat al-Thaqāfa* (Riyadh, 2021).

[3] "About Us," *Jeddah Historic District* (2024), accessed on 28/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/4dYknae

[4] Hanadi Eid Al-Harbi & Samirah Saad Al-Saleh, "al-Āthār al-Siyāḥiyya lil-Muqawwimāt al-Tārīkhiyya fī Madīnat Jidda," *Majallat al-ʿUlum al-Insaniyya wa-l-Ijtimaʿiyyah*, vol. 5, no. 15 (December 2021), pp. 104-119.

[5] Ulrike Freitag, *A History of Jeddah: The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 339, 363.

[6] Abdelaziz Elfadaly, "Cultural Heritage Management Using Remote Sensing Data and GIS Techniques around the Archaeological Area of Ancient Jeddah in Jeddah City, Saudi Arabia," *Sustainability*, vol. 12 (2020), pp. 1-15; Mohammed Aloshan et al., "Strategies for the Preservation of Historic Areas within Existing Middle Eastern Cities: The Case of Historic Jeddah," *Buildings*, vol. 14, no. 3 (March 2024), pp. 1-21.

[7] Mohammed Abubaker A. Bagader, "The Evolution of Built Heritage Conservation Policies in Saudi Arabia between 1970 and 2015: The Case of Historic Jeddah," PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, Manchester, 2016.

Nevertheless, the relationship between conserving Historic Jeddah as a cultural heritage and forging a new Saudi culture remains understudied.

At the state level, a more recent body of literature addresses the social and cultural aspects of Saudi Arabia's ongoing transition. Jörg Matthias Determann examines the historiographical narratives of modern Saudi Arabia, highlighting the state's dual role as both sponsor and censor.[8] Rosie Bsheer, in her study of construction projects in Riyadh and Mecca, argues that the Saudi government is deliberately rewriting the "material history" embodied in historical city quarters and sponsoring "heritage protection", such as in Diriyah, to reinforce state legitimacy.[9] Despite these important contributions, Historic Jeddah has received only limited attention. Few studies have incorporated it as a case study for examining the government's heritage projects through the lens of nation-building frameworks.

To bridge the existing gap in scholarly literature, this study argues that the urban transformation of *al-Balad* should be understood as a diachronic process with twofold implications. On the one hand, the physical development and administration of Jeddah are closely related to the growth of the state apparatus and its rent- and distribution-based capacities.[10] On the other hand, the diminishing of *al-Balad*'s symbolic value then its exploitation reflects the government's cultural politics, which serves the nation-building process.[11]

This study examines the urban transformation in Jeddah, with a particular focus on *al-Balad*, by elucidating the effects of this process on both the state-building and nation-building processes. The analysis integrates primary and secondary sources with empirical insights gathered during two fieldwork visits to Jeddah and Riyadh, carried out in February and August 2024. During these trips, we surveyed the built environment of *al-Balad* and made three visits to Al Tayebat International City Museum of Science and Information, which exhibits relevant artwork and miniatures of *al-Balad*. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Jeddawi shop owners, expatriate workers in Historic Jeddah, senior diplomats, and stakeholders in the tourism industry who provided their perspectives on the district's conservation project.[12]

The first section examines the formation of "Jeddawi" identity and the evolution of interregional dynamics in Saudi Arabia, with particular attention to Hijazi-Najdi tensions leading up to the 1960s. The second section focuses on the mid-1960s to the early 2000s, a period during which the Saudi state-building project significantly shaped Jeddah and *al-Balad*. The third section analyses the transformation of *al-Balad* since 2005, exploring the implications of recent development projects within the framework of Saudi nation-building. The study uses "*al-Balad*" to refer to the urban space and the building complex that principally constituted the historical core of the city of Jeddah. The terms "Historic Jeddah" and "Old Jeddah" are also employed interchangeably to denote the same area.

Jeddawi Identity and Interregional Dynamics in the Making

The early- to mid-20th century stands as a vital period for the Arabian Peninsula, with the Hijaz and Najd experiencing the most significant transformations. In political terms, the post-World War I period witnessed a direct conflict between Sharif Hussein bin Ali (r. 1916-1924) and King Abdulaziz Al Saud (r. 1926-1932), culminating in the collapse of Hashemite rule in the region and the consolidation of the Third Saudi State.[13]

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[8] Jörg Matthias Determann, *Historiography in Saudi Arabia: Globalization and the State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 111.

[9] Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 141-145.

[10] For a more detailed account, see: Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 10-12.

[11] As mentioned before, Rosie Bsheer's study on Riyadh and Mecca has demonstrated the validity of this approach. See: Bsheer, pp. 141-145, 172-190.

[12] The author intended to conduct interviews with senior government officials in charge of the Historic Jeddah project and Saudi scholars specialized in the transformation of Jeddah. However, initial emails did not receive any reply.

[13] For the history of Al Saud's conquest of the Hijaz, see: Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 37-45.

The conquest of the Hijaz held profound significance for King Abdulaziz and, subsequently, for the Al Saud family in many perspectives. While Hijazi religious and secular intellectuals – mainly from Mecca and Jeddah – came to prominence in the Saudi state, the relation between the Hijaz and the central government was largely confined to the symbolic value of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and to the state's access to pilgrimage tax, which at the time functioned as its economic lifeline.[14]

While the political landscape in the Peninsula underwent decisive change, the cultural differences among its various regions were consequently inherited by the Saudi state. In addition to the long-standing conflict between sedentary (*ḥaḍar*) and nomadic (*badū*) peoples, tensions between the Hijaz and Najd also came to the forefront within the kingdom's newly "united" territories.

The Dihlīz of Mecca and Jiddah Ghayr: "Jeddawi" Identity Materialized

For much of its history, Jeddah served as the port of Mecca, securing its position as the gateway (*dihlīz* or *dahlīz*) to the holy city of Islam. In the 19th century, the prosperous coastal town functioned as a key stopover for travellers journeying to or from other Hijazi cities.[15] Meanwhile, the port occupied a prominent position in the entrepôt trade of the Red Sea region. Intensive flows of goods and people, combined with a cultural sophistication sustained through interactions with the outer world, shaped the exceptionality of Jeddah, encapsulated in the popular phrase used by its residents, "Jeddah is different" (*Jiddah ghayr*).[16]

One of the most striking manifestations of Jeddah's multifaceted exceptionality is its architectural splendour. The city's multi-storey residential houses were constructed using coral limestones and other stones locally quarried from Lake al-Arbaʿeen, a lagoon to the northwest of Historic Jeddah.[17] A defining feature of these structures is the Arabian wooden balcony (*rawshan* or *mashrabiyyah*), intricately carved with delicate designs and adopted for both its aesthetic appeal and functional advantages.[18] Influenced by Egyptian and European styles and shaped by technical advancements in architecture, the buildings' architectural style changed significantly before it was finalized during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[19]

Landmarks including mosques, markets (*sūq*s), and the two gates – *Bāb Makkah* and *Bāb al-Madīnah,* all enclosed within the city wall – also figure prominently. For Jeddawis, this built environment held a significance rooted deeply in their identity, not only for its architectural beauty but also for its connection to social practices in the Hijaz region, where "ceremonies are confined to the privacy of the home because their observance takes place in defiance of official rules".[20]

As Nelida Fuccaro notes, "traditional urban forms are increasingly acting as a source of 'cultural/ national' identity by functioning as a catalyst of collective memory".[21] Nevertheless, a critical question emerges concerning the "limit" of *al-Balad* as a complex assemblage of "traditional urban forms". This question is often overlooked in studies that focus on "conserving" the material artefacts of the built environment, but it is essential for bridging the gap between grasping *al-Balad* simply as a site of urban transformation and pinpointing its position in the process of Saudi nation-building. In this context, this study argues that *al-Balad* is not to be reduced to a solely spatial and architectural concept but must be

[14] Mai Yamani, *Cradle of Islam: Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 54-55.

[15] John Keane, *Six Months in the Hejaz: Journeys to Makkah and Madinah 1877–1878* (Manchester/ Beirut: Barzan Publishing, 2006), pp.186-187; John Lewis Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia* (Abingdon: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), pp. 1-3.

[16] Freitag, p. 1.

[17] Rihab Abdulrahman Ahmad Fadil, "Madīnat Jidda: Dirāsa Tārīkhiyya Taḥlīliyya," *Majallat al-Qulzum li-l-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyya wa-l-Hadariyya*, no. 14 (March 2022), p. 82.

[18] Abdulquddus al-Anṣari, *Mawsūʿat Tārīkh Madīnat Jidda,* 4th ed. (Jeddah: Dar al-Manhal li-l-Sahafa wa-l-Nashr al-Mahduda, 2018), pp. 57-82.

[19] Sameer Mahmoud Z. Al-Lyaly, "The Traditional House of Jeddah: A Study of the Interaction between Climate, Form and Living Patterns," PhD Thesis, Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 23.

[20] Yamani, p. 23.

[21] Nelida Fuccaro, "Visions of the City: Urban Studies on the Gulf," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Winter 2001), p. 181.

conceptualized as a conglomerate encompassing both the actual built environment within the limit of the old city wall and the original "Jeddawi" community with its cultural symbols.

Figure (1): Maps of Historic Jeddah in 1894 (left) and 1960 (right)

Source: Allies & Morrison, "Al-Balad: Public Realm Strategy and Design Manual," jeddahalbalad, pp. 20-21, accessed 15/1/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zRdd

On this basis, the formation of *al-Balad*'s built environment was completed before the advent of Saudi rule in the Hijaz. The subsequent period was marked by both the physical deterioration of the district and a decline in cultural sophistication and exceptionalism.[22] Crucially, the underlying political logic for *al-Balad* rested on a decentralized authority and collaborative governance among residing families, which is further reinforced by "its lack of a central space allocated to governmental and religious institutions".[23] As will be discussed below, this decentralized model was fundamentally disrupted with the imposition of a strong central government. The Hijaz-Najd dynamics gradually deprived Hijazis – including Jeddawis – of their economic and institutional advantages, setting the stage for the conservation of Historic Jeddah as a heritage site.

Changing Interregional Dynamics: The Political-Economic Context

The volatility of Hijazi-Najdi relations was embodied in the strife between two political entities led by Sharif Hussein and King Abdulaziz respectively. A series of campaigns eventually ended the Hashemite rule in the Hijaz, with Mecca surrendering on 5 December 1924 followed by Jeddah on 16 December 1925.[24]

Obtaining political recognition and new sources of income was the major development that followed. Abdulaziz first received the pledge of allegiance from the Hijazi notables, followed by recognition from Great Britain, the USSR, France, and the Netherlands.[25] Overland trade routes were secured, and the royal court now had access to the pilgrimage tax levied in Jeddah.[26]

Upon signing the Treaty of Jeddah on 20 May 1927, Abdulaziz was addressed as the ruler of "the Kingdom of Najd, Hijaz and its Dependencies".[27] While political and economic consolidation in the region

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[22] Freitag, pp. 51-60.

[23] Al-Lyaly, p. 31.

[24] Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 43-44.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Tim Niblock & Monica Malik, *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 21-22.

[27] Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 28; Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 45.

advanced steadily, no serious attempt was made to culturally incorporate or assimilate the Hijazis, as doing so would have required penetrating the region's longstanding social structure. Important elements remained alive in the collective memory of Hijazis, such as the superiority of the region and its cities in terms of material affluence and cultural sophistication.

Within the new context of Saudi rule, the Hijaz – and notably Jeddah – retained a degree of prominence in the tension with Najd, represented by Riyadh. Jeddah remained the kingdom's economic pillar and gateway to the outside world. Income from the Hajj "provided 60% of the government's total revenue of 12 million riyals in 1932". Diplomatic missions to Saudi Arabia gravitated to Jeddah,[28] and the city's port came to receive the bulk of the kingdom's international trade.

As oil gradually became the main source of government revenue, the economic significance of Jeddah began to decline. The changed political-economic dynamics soon manifested socially with the rise of the Najdi middle-class and the growing centrality of Riyadh as the capital city.[29] As will be discussed in the next section, this new landscape impacted the built environment of Historic Jeddah significantly, while social changes in the district and its proximity caused a decisive "rupture" between the material heritage and its original residents.

"Protecting" al-Balad in the Modernization Period

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Saudi Arabia embarked on an unprecedented phase of modernization, coinciding with the ascension of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and a substantial increase in oil revenues.[30] The expansion of state capacity, including planning, administration, social welfare, and economic projects, became the central concern of the Saudi government. To that end, administrative frameworks were introduced and plans for the development of major cities were devised. While the "state" of Saudi Arabia gradually fledged, the "nation" of Saudi Arabia remained underdefined. Modernization functioned as the main source of social mobilization and regime legitimacy throughout much of the mid- to late-20th century, effectively postponing the need to define a "Saudi" nation and resulting in a gap between state-building and nation-building processes.[31]

Modernization and Economic Rationality

When King Faisal ascended to the throne, the material infrastructure of the Kingdom remained severely underdeveloped, and government ministries were constrained by limited budgets.[32] As economic resources began to expand steadily, King Faisal launched a major modernization project. Urban development received substantial attention at the state level, and a series of measures were introduced to regulate the future development of Saudi cities. In the case of Jeddah, a UN committee tasked with advising the Saudi government on regional and urban planning, upon the request of Department of Municipal Affairs, recommended engaging the English firm Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM) as consultant to the Jeddah Municipality and the entire "Western Region" for devising a master plan for urban development.[33]

By that time, Jeddah had witnessed substantial growth in both size and population, while *al-Balad* remained the city's centre.[34] In 1947, the city wall was demolished to make way for the construction of new accommodations and a ring road surrounding the old city core. Modern commercial buildings were

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28 Quoted in: Yamani, p. 54.
29 Niblock, *Saudi Arabia*, p. 44.
30 Hertog, pp. 61-65; Niblock & Malik, pp. 32-52.
31 Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*, pp. 164-174.
32 Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 116-117.
33 George Orr Duncan, "The Planning and Development of the City of Jeddah: 1970-1984," PhD Thesis, Durham University, Durham, 1987, pp. 51-52.
34 By 1978, the metropolitan area of Jeddah covered 1,215 square kilometers, with 97 square kilometers developed. A 1974 census indicates that city population stood at 561,104. See: Fadil, p. 70.

built west of the ring road, while the area surrounding *Bāb Makkah* became a residential quarter, largely composed of newly constructed houses and shops. In 1970, part of *al-Balad* was demolished to open a new north-south motorway, al-Dhahab Street, which cut through the traditional urban fabric.[35]

The Master Plan proposed by RMJM acknowledged the need to protect *al-Balad* as an inseparable part of the city. As the only governmental plan in the 20th century to provide directions for protecting *al-Balad*, the Master Plan had a lasting impact. However, the logic behind the development of the Historic Area requires reassessment. First, the Plan effectively justified the growing human activity and changes in the built environment that followed the removal of the walls by preserving the status quo, rather than adopting a stricter approach to prevent the Historic Area from further exposure to damaging exploitations. The Master Plan divided the Historic Area into four large zones: 1, 2, 3, and 3a. Zone 1 encompassed the coastal area; Zone 2 was designated as the central commercial zone, accommodating commercial centres and high-rise residential buildings; Zones 3, 2a, and 2b comprised the traditional residential zone; and Zone 3a was designated as a new mixed-use zone[36] While this delineation met the municipality's request to define the boundaries of and within the Historic Area, maintaining the status quo for this area effectively meant that little was done to regulate or mitigate the intensive commercial and living activities. As a result, *al-Balad* remained exposed to significant adverse impacts.

Figure (2): Historic Area Delineation in the Master Plan

Source: George Orr Duncan, "The Planning and Development of the City of Jeddah: 1970-1984," PhD Thesis, Durham University, Durham, 1987, p. 256.

Second, in terms of cost, the Master Plan estimated that the comprehensive conservation of traditional residential neighbourhoods would require $200 million (approximately SAR 706 million in 1976), amounting to 28.6% of the total $700 million originally allocated for the implementation of the entire Plan. This figure also represented 4.6% of the annual budget allocated for the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MoMRA), which was elevated from committee to ministry in 1976. In addition, the city of Jeddah in the 1970s was already preoccupied with two major infrastructure projects: the construction of King Abdulaziz International Airport and the Jeddah Islamic Port.[37] In the competition for governmental financial as well

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35 Allies & Morrison, "Al-Balad: Public Realm Strategy and Design Manual," *jeddahalbalad*, p. 20, accessed on 15/1/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zRdd

36 Duncan, p. 220.

37 Anthony Axon & Susan Hewitt, *Contemporary Archive of the Islamic World, vol. 5: Saudi Arabia, 1975-2020* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 115, 135.

as administrative resources, it became clear that the conservation of the old city, perceived as offering marginal economic and symbolic benefits, had to be sidelined.

In addition, the implementation of the Master Plan was tied to specific individuals. Its preparation and initial implementation coincided with the tenure of Mohammad Said Farsi (r. 1973-1986) as mayor of Jeddah. A Jeddawi himself, Farsi prioritized the preservation of the Old City and actively coordinated governmental resources.[38] However, beyond his tenure, the preservation of traditional buildings in *al-Balad* was poorly executed due to strife between various governmental bodies and disputes between the government and landowners or tenants. Moreover, despite the involvement of local stakeholders, the municipality viewed the traditional houses as simply based on "a Turkish or an Egyptian model",[39] emphasizing the district's "imported" characteristics and downplaying its indigenous features.

The cost of the project, combined with flaws in the Master Plan and challenges in its implementation, led to the further deterioration of *al-Balad* from the mid-1980s onward. Although the Saudi government introduced the Law on the Preservation of Historic Jeddah in 1981 – officially designating the district as the country's sole recognized architectural heritage at that time and providing a framework for its preservation – the Master Plan's recommendation to establish a specialized body to manage and restore *al-Balad* was never realized, resulting in a lack of sustained, effective execution of the law by the Jeddah municipality.[40]

Social Dynamics: Deprivation of "Local Communities"

In addition to top-down conservation measures, community changes within *al-Balad* during this period not only contributed to the built environment's decay but also to a decisive disengagement between that built environment and its Jeddawi inhabitants. Although official statistics are lacking, native families living in *al-Balad* began to relocate as early as the 1960s – either selling or renting out their properties, or allowing them to fall into disrepair – to newer neighbourhoods offering modern amenities.[41] Over time, low- and middle-income labourers from Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Yemen came to form the bulk of *al-Balad*'s population. By the 1980s, all locals had moved out.[42] It was only after this period that the Hijazi elite began to express a renewed interest in reclaiming a local identity,[43] an impulse epitomized by the "*Jiddah Ghayr*" Festival in 1998.[44]

As the traditional Jeddawi community disintegrated, the symbolic significance of *al-Balad* was thus reduced to the aesthetic value of the built environment itself, along with scant cultural symbols. This observation is subtly reflected in the displays at the Al Tayebat International City Museum of Science and Information, where a large number of paintings from the 1980s and 1990s depict *al-Balad*'s urban landscapes. This commemoration of the built environment, rather than living scenes or local traditions, echoes the results of the 1978 questionnaire survey conducted by RMJM, in which more than half of the respondents said that the architectural form of *al-Balad* "reminds them of the past", reflecting a kind of nostalgia ingrained in the community.[45]

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[38] Bagader, "Evolution," p. 256.

[39] Quoted in: Al-Lyaly, p. 49.

[40] Bagader, "Evolution," p. 111.

[41] Tim Niblock, *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 171.

[42] Stefan Maneval, *New Islamic Urbanism: The Architecture of Public and Private Space in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia* (London: UCL Press, 2019), p. 38; Bagader, "The Evolution of Built Heritage Conservation Policies in Saudi Arabia between 1970 and 2015," p. 126.

[43] Yamani, p. 19.

[44] "ʿĀm / Mahrajān 'Jidda Ghayr' Yadkhul ʿĀmahu al-Rābiʿ ʿAshar bi-Tanawwuʿ fī al-Faʿʿāliyyat li-Daʿm al-Siyāḥa al-Mustadāma bi-l-Mamlaka," *Saudi Press Agency*, 20/4/2012, accessed on 17/10/2024, at:

https://bit.ly/3Nr5SAF

[45] Duncan, p. 229.

Figure (3): A 1980 Sketch of al-Balad, Displaying Central Features Such as Unpaved Roads and a Horse-Drawn Watercart

Source: Photo by the author at Al Tayebat International City Museum.

Figure (4): Oil Paintings Depicting Street Views of al-Balad

Source: Photo by the author at Al Tayebat International City Museum.

In sum, the social dynamics of this period – mainly the demographic change – converged with a state-building process that prioritized economic development, effectively "hollowing out" *al-Balad* of both its architectural beauty and original inhabitants. The lack of adequate infrastructure combined with the influx of foreign workers led to the deterioration of the built environment. This, in turn, was compounded by the limited participation of local residents and their upholding of "traditions", rending *al-Balad* a passive recipient of governmental conservation schemes, which often aimed at sustaining economic development rather than saving the site from decay and loss of cultural values. Therefore, the Saudi state-building process during this period reduced *al-Balad* to merely an architectural compound with limited symbolic value.

The New Millennium and the Turn to Material History

In the early 2000s, the Kingdom's need to address domestic problems and improve its international image prompted a series of institutional changes and the advent of more liberal cultural policies. Under King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (r. 2005-2015), the conservation or redevelopment of historical sites also began to gain momentum, with Mecca and Riyadh at the forefront of these initiatives.[46] During this period, the concept of "tangible heritage" was formally introduced into the decision-making process concerning

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[46] Bsheer, p. 25.

the preservation and redevelopment of historical sites, ushering in a new period of heritage conservation and tourism – not only in Saudi Arabia but across the wider region.[47]

Amid this renewed attention, *al-Balad* entered a new phase of urban transformation, with increasing emphasis on harnessing its touristic potential and cultural significance.[48] In the preceding period, the physical decay and social hollowing out of *al-Balad* had rendered conservation efforts insufficient to restore the old city core's status, let alone the tourism development it entails. At the same time, the erosion of cultural symbols made *al-Balad* a relatively "malleable" site in terms of functioning as a complex set of cultural symbols.

Forming a "National Brand"

In 2006, King Abdullah approved the nomination of "Historic Jeddah" for inscription on the World Heritage List and instructed the Supreme Tourism Authority to make the necessary preparations. As in earlier phases of *al-Balad*'s conservation, personal factors influenced the implementation of policies. Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (1956-), then Head of Board of the Supreme Tourism Authority, personally prioritized the preservation of *al-Balad* and used his influence to convince the Municipality of Jeddah to accept the guidance of the reorganized Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA).[49] However, UNESCO rejected the initial nomination in 2011 due to several reasons, including the substantial damage. It took three more years before *al-Balad* was inscribed on the World Heritage List after further revisions.[50] By contrast, Diriyah – under the supervision of then-Governor of Riyadh, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud – was nominated in 2009 and successfully inscribed the following year for its Turaif district.

Figure (5): al-Balad

Source: Photos courtesy of Professor Fu Zhiming, Peking University, September 2009.

Consequently, as a necessary step toward tourism development and inscription of *al-Balad* on the World Heritage List, the Saudi government initiated a series of redevelopment efforts including the further development of infrastructure, such as paved roads, water supply, and drainage networks.

The renewed momentum regarding the conservation of *al-Balad* gained relative coherence in the 2010s with Historic Jeddah being inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014, marking only the beginning of a broader initiative to brand the area. In 2018, the Jeddah Historic District Program was established by royal decree under the Ministry of Culture.[51] This was followed in 2021 by Crown Prince Muhammad bin

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[47] This can be observed in the names of government entities. In 2000, the Saudi government established the Supreme Commission of Tourism (SCT), which is primarily responsible for tourism. After King Abdullah ascended to the throne, the Commission was merged with the former Agency of Antiquities and Museums in 2008 and renamed as the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), which was subsequently renamed the Saudi General Authority for Tourism and National Heritage in 2015. For an account of the regional development, see: C. Michael Hall & Siamak Seyfi (eds.), *Cultural and Heritage Tourism in the Middle East and North Africa: Complexities, Management and Practices* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 14-23.

[48] Mohammad Abubaker A. Bagader, "The Impacts of UNESCO's Built Heritage Conservation Policy (2010-2020) on Historic Jeddah Built Environment," *WTI Transactions on the Built Environment*, vol. 177 (2018), p. 2.

[49] Bagader, "Evolution," p. 255.

[50] Bagader, "Impacts," p. 2.

[51] "About Us," *Jeddah Historic District* (2024), accessed on 28/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/4dYknae

Salman's announcement of the "Historic Jeddah Revitalization Project".[52] Currently, land and buildings within *al-Balad* have been expropriated by the Saudi government and entirely entrusted to the Ministry of Culture.

Figure (6): Bayt Nassif

Source: Photo by author, August 2024.

Figure (7): Construction Sites in al-Balad, with the Logo of the Ministry of Culture Visible on the Fences

Source: Photos by author, August 2024.

Judging by the scale of recent high-profile projects and related propaganda, Historic Jeddah appears to be well on its way to becoming a national brand. Nevertheless, beneath this façade lie unresolved questions regarding the symbolic "engineering" underway in *al-Balad* – a process connected to the broader nation-building process, as will be discussed below.

Retroactive Nation-Building: Reinterpreting al-Balad

Despite the turn toward a more secular historical narrative, the sole emphasis on the role of Al Saud in the modern "renaissance" (*nahḍa*) appears insufficient to sustain that narrative's credibility. In the face of growing domestic dissent, changing international perceptions, and the increasing volatility of oil as a revenue source, the nation-building process was initiated.

The new Saudi nationalism positions the image-building of Al Saud at its core, affirming the royal family's role in the unification, self-defence, and modernization of the Saudi nation.[53] Additionally, the role of Islam is deliberately downplayed as the new nation-building process draws increasingly upon non-Islamic factors, including the open commemoration of objects and spaces.[54]

Against such a backdrop, *al-Balad* emerged as a focal point in the Kingdom's nation-building process. As argued above, by the end of the 20th century *al-Balad* had been largely emptied of its original residents,

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[52] "Mashrūʿ Iḥyāʾ Jiddah al-Tārīkhiyya," *Saudipedia*, accessed on 2/9/2024, at: https://bit.ly/4g6nlvh

[53] Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*, pp. 164-174.

[54] Bsheer, p. 13.

resulting in the erosion of much of its symbolic vitality, largely becoming a "static" heritage site. Its important role in the Hajj was reduced merely to economic functions such as resupply and transportation, while the cultural connection between Jeddah and Mecca was marginalized. Nevertheless, architectural features, handicrafts, and artistic workshops allowed the old city core to retain some of its "Jeddawi" peculiarity. These features – now safely embedded within official narratives – have been branded as markers of the Kingdom's diversity.[55]

A specific case of this may be the extensive propagation of the *rawshan*, which has been held up in the official narrative – often in collaboration with local actors – as the epitome of the Hijazi architecture. In *al-Balad*, workshops now showcase the craftsmanship involved in producing the *rawshan*'s intricate wooden components. Additionally, Hijazi families are celebrated for their support of King Abdulaziz and for their homes, such as Bayt Nassif.[56]

Figure (8): A DIY Workshop Showcasing the Basic Components of Rawshan and the Tools Needed

Source: Photo by author, August 2024.

This controlled expression of diversity forms a vivid contrast to Diriyah, the birthplace of the First Saudi State founded in 1727. The restored built environment, along with the museum introducing the history of Al Saud and their military campaigns, revolves exclusively around the official historical narrative.

Figure (9): A Sandbox Model of Diriyah (left); The Family Tree of Al Saud, with King Salman at Centre (Right)

Source: Photo by author, August 2024.

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55 The approach offered by Steffen Wippel may help in clarifying the matter, see: Steffen Wippel (ed.), *Branding the Middle East: Communication Strategies and Image Building from Qom to Casablanca* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), pp. 100-103.
56 For example: "Nassif House," *Saudipedia*, accessed on 19/10/2024, at: https://bit.ly/3UeiXRw

In this regard, *al-Balad* has been recast as a "donor" of cultural symbols within the nation-building discourse, contributing to the reinforcement of regime legitimacy. It has been "revitalized" as part of Saudi cultural heritage, but because this revitalization is also a process of selective interpretation, material artefacts can be used for branding whilst downplaying cultural or intellectual particularities.

Conclusion

In her analysis of cultural politics in modern Saudi Arabia, Rosie Bsheer notes that the belated turn to material history "was also anchored in the erasure of sites that recalled or made possible alternative social imaginaries antagonistic to the regime's legitimating mythos".[57] Nelida Fuccaro argues that "all over the Gulf, heritage sites and buildings have been transformed into symbols of national character".[58] Both remarks offer valuable insights, and their arguments find strong resonance in the case of Jeddah's *al-Balad*. Nevertheless, the district was not erased or "bulldozed" entirely: its deprivation of its original dwellers paved the way for its "controllable" role in the nation-building process.

The urban transformation of *al-Balad* was a testament to the desynchrony between state-building and nation-building processes in rentier states such as Saudi Arabia. It is precisely the state-building process – in which *al-Balad* bore the brunt of socio-economic changes – that caused the partial diminishment of symbolic values with which the built environment was endowed. In turn, this loss rendered *al-Balad* increasingly susceptible to top-down interpretation in the belated nation-building process. This diachronic study of *al-Balad*'s urban transformation has thus illuminated the evolving interplay between state-building and nation-building processes in Saudi Arabia.

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this article has moved beyond the relatively abundant scholarly debate on the architectural heritage and conservation, seeking to grasp the process of urban transformation within the broader context of nation and state building.

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57   Bsheer, p. 23.
58   Fuccaro, p. 181.

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Federico Cugurullo*, Isobel Lee**& Rebecca Weir***

Cyberpunk Urban Fantasies in the Gulf: The Line as an Incubator of Modernization in Saudi Arabia and Beyond****

<div dir="rtl">

الفانتازيا الحضرية السايبربنكية في الخليج: مدينة "ذا لاين" حاضنةً للتحديث في السعودية وخارجها

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Abstract: The Line is a futuristic city under construction in Saudi Arabia. This study examines its development as an incubator of modernization, seeking to transform the socio-cultural and infrastructural landscape of the country. The study notes how The Line's aspirations are genealogically rooted in a Western cyberpunk imaginary picturing hypermodern cities inhabited by artificial intelligences (AI). It reveals the influence of cyberpunk fiction in shaping the conceptualization of The Line, representing a deliberate break with Saudi Arabia's urban and cultural past. The study critically analyses the role that modernization as a double-edged sword plays in advancing novel ideas inspired by Western culture, while undermining a longstanding part of traditional Saudi culture.

Keywords: The Line; Saudi Arabia; Modernization; Cyberpunk; Artificial Intelligence.

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الملخص: تبحث الدراسة في تطوّر مدينة "ذا لاين" في المملكة العربية السعودية، وهي مدينة قيد الإنشاء فائقة التطور وحاضنة للتحديث، تسعى إلى تغيير البنية التحتية والمشهدَين الاجتماعي والثقافي للسعودية. توضح الدراسة أنّ تطلّعات مدينة "ذا لاين" المبنيّة في الأصل على سايبربنك غربي يصوّر مدنًا فائقة الحداثة تسكنها منظومة الذكاء الاصطناعي على نحو يقطع، متعمِّدًا، مع الماضي الحضري والثقافي للبلاد. في هذا السياق، تتناول الدراسة، نقديًا، دور التحديث، بوصفه سلاحًا ذا حدَّين، يعزز الأفكار الجديدة المستوحاة من الثقافة الغربية، ويهدّد، في الوقت نفسه، جذور الثقافة والتقاليد السعودية.

كلمات مفتاحية: ذا لاين؛ المملكة العربية السعودية؛ التحديث؛ السايبربنك؛ الذكاء الاصطناعي.

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Introduction

Modernity is a potent driver of change, capable of transforming society, cultural norms, and the material components of human life, including technology, infrastructure, and the built environment.[1] Historically, such changes have often taken place at an unprecedented pace, triggering cultural shocks and socio-environmental transformations whose adverse consequences have outweighed their benefits, particularly in relation to issues of urbanization.[2]

This paper focuses on the complex relationship between the Gulf and modernity, with an emphasis on urban development processes. Since the discovery of vast oil reserves in the 1930s, several Gulf cities have acted as incubators of modernization, giving rise to hypermodern architectures in desert environments. The desert landscape itself has played a significant role in shaping the region's urbanization and modernization, further accentuated by the historical absence of large, ancient cities across the Arabian Peninsula.[3] In this context, the desert has been controversially interpreted by modernizers in the Gulf as a *tabula rasa*: a blank canvas where dreams of modernity may be drawn and realized in the shape of new metropolises, without necessarily conforming with the region's urban past. Urban modernity, therefore, can be understood as a drastic break with the past, propelled by the will to start anew.[4] As Zaidan and Abulibdeh note in the case of Gulf cities, such an inclination has been recurringly coupled with the assumption that local traditions and cultures are "inferior to their 'modern' Western counterparts".[5] However, tensions inevitably arise when idealized visions of modernity confront the realities of specific geographical and cultural contexts. These tensions, and the way they are (re)produced by urban modernity in the Gulf today, are the core focus of this paper.

Theoretically, this paper embraces Molotch and Ponzini's[6] twofold approach, which captures the uniqueness of specific Gulf cities, while simultaneously "de-exceptionalizing" them, to flesh out both the region's distinct geographies and its connections with global urban trends. As Molotch and Ponzini argue, this approach generates insights that extend beyond the Gulf and contribute to contemporary urban theory.[7] At the same time, this perspective enriches understandings of the Gulf by providing case studies that reveal the constant, rapid, and multifaceted Arab urban evolution in the 21st century. In this regard, the existing literature on experimental cities akin to The Line supports Molotch and Ponzini's approach.

Empirically, this paper centres on The Line, a new city currently under construction in Saudi Arabia as part of the ambitious NEOM megaproject. Promoted by a state-owned company led by the Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), The Line is envisioned as a model of the city of the future: a high-tech, urban settlement designed to accommodate, in theory, nine million residents within a linear built environment extending 170 km in length. Initially slated for completion in 2030, the project will arguably have repercussions on the infrastructure, politics, and culture of Saudi Arabia and beyond, regardless of its eventual material form.

The paper draws on fieldwork conducted between 2022 to 2024 in Saudi Arabia and in Venice, where the NEOM project was officially showcased in 2023 during the Biennale di Venezia. The research is grounded in over 30 semi-structured interviews with NEOM representatives and concept artists involved in the initial phase of The Line's conceptualization. To protect the anonymity of participants, neither their names nor their specific roles within the NEOM project are disclosed.

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[1] Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London/ New York: Verso, 1983); Federico Cugurullo, *Frankenstein Urbanism: Eco, Smart and Autonomous Cities, Artificial Intelligence and the End of the City* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 12.

[2] Cugurullo, *Frankenstein Urbanism*; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), pp. 3-4.

[3] Hassan al-Khayyat, *al-Madīna al-ʿArabiyya al-Khalījiyya: Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāṣara fī al-Takhṭīṭ wa-l-ʿImāra* (Doha: Qatar University, 1988).

[4] Cugurullo, *Frankenstein Urbanism*, p. 125.

[5] Esmat Zaidan & Ammar Abulibdeh, "Master Planning and the Evolving Urban Model in the Gulf Cities: Principles, Policies, and Practices for the Transition to Sustainable Urbanism," *Planning Practice & Research*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2021), p. 196.

[6] Harvey Molotch & Davide Ponzini (eds.), *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), pp. 2-3.

[7] Ibid.

Building on a review of the academic literature on experimental cities in the Gulf, the analysis begins by identifying three main waves of modernization triggered by the development of The Line. The paper then traces the genealogy of the project's modernization, showing how its underlying aspirations are deeply rooted in a Western cyberpunk imaginary picturing hypermodern metropolises populated and managed by AI. In its final section, the paper reflects on the role of modernization within and beyond the Saudi context. With its impetus of modernity, The Line has the power of modernizing not only Saudi Arabia, but also the way other places beyond the Gulf are understanding and using AI. Yet, as modernity always comes with a price, it remains to be seen what The Line will leave behind in its rush toward the future.

Modernization in Experimental Gulf Cities

When it comes to experimental cities, the Gulf has a relatively recent and yet already rich urban history. This is a geographical area where, especially over the past couple of decades, ambitious urban megaprojects have abounded.[8] Within this strand of urbanization, *ex novo* experimental urban projects deserve special attention since they belong to the same type of urbanism that The Line is part of. What distinguishes these spatial formations is, first and foremost, the nature of the space in which they are developed. These are *ex novo* urban projects in the sense that, geographically, their construction takes place in underdeveloped areas where urban infrastructure is built from scratch.[9] Infrastructurally, new technologies play a prominent role, and the built environment is used to test them as a way to experiment with alternative forms of urban management, such as automated energy grids and anticipatory interventions based on predictive algorithms.[10] Philosophically, modernity permeates the ethos of urban experimentation, with new cities and districts designed as a medium to advance alternative social and spatial structures, often in a deliberate attempt to break with the past.[11]

The study of Masdar City, for instance, a new master-planned urban project developed in Abu Dhabi, has been helpful not simply to comprehend how urbanization, specifically in the United Arab Emirates, has become an instrument to diversify regional economies and move away from oil and gas.[12] It has also illuminated aspects of international urban phenomena, including experiments in ecological urbanism, the formation of smart cities and the automation of urban infrastructure, that have resonated with global theoretical literature on the contemporary city.[13] The masterplan of Masdar City is a prominent example

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[8] Ali A. Alraouf, "The Urban Megaprojects Paradigm in Qatar: A Holistic Criticism and Premeditated Prophecy," *Journal of Urban Research and Development*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2020), p. 30; Davide Ponzini, "Large Scale Development Projects and Star Architecture in the Absence of Democratic Politics: The Case of Abu Dhabi, UAE," *Cities*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2011), pp. 251-259; Agatino Rizzo, "Sustainable Urban Development and Green Megaprojects in the Arab States of the Gulf Region: Limitations, Covert Aims, and Unintended Outcomes in Doha, Qatar," *International Planning Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2017), pp. 85-98.

[9] Jasmine Ali & Sarah Moser, "New Cities for a 'New Kuwait': Planning for National Continuity and Stability," *International Planning Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2024), pp. 252-267; Federico Cugurullo, "Urban eco-modernisation and the Policy Context of New eco-city Projects: Where Masdar City fails and why," *Urban Studies*, vol. 53, no. 11 (2016), p. 2417.

[10] Cugurullo, *Frankenstein urbanism*; Sarah Moser, "New Cities: Old Wine in New Bottles?," *Dialogues in Human Geography*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2015), pp. 31-35; Femke Van Noorloos & Marjan Kloosterboer, "Africa's New Cities: The Contested Future of Urbanisation," *Urban Studies*, vol. 55, no. 6 (2018), pp. 1223-1241; Ying Xu et al., "The Emergence of Artificial Intelligence in Anticipatory Urban Governance: Multi-Scalar Evidence of China's Transition to City Brains," *Journal of Urban Technology* (2024), pp. 1-25.

[11] Cugurullo, *Frankenstein urbanism*, p. 1.

[12] Cugurullo, "Urban eco-modernisation and the Policy Context of New eco-city Projects," pp. 2417-2433; Federico Cugurullo & Davide Ponzini, "The Transnational Smart City as Urban Eco-Modernisation: The Case of Masdar City in Abu Dhabi," in: Karvonen Andrew (ed.), *Inside Smart Cities: Place, Politics and Urban Innovation* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 149-162; Steven Griffiths & Benjamin K. Sovacool, "Rethinking the Future Low-Carbon City: Carbon Neutrality, Green Design, and Sustainability Tensions in the Making of Masdar City," *Energy Research & Social Science*, vol. 62 (2020), p. 101368.

[13] Federico Cugurullo, "Exposing Smart Cities and Eco-Cities: Frankenstein Urbanism and the Sustainability Challenges of the Experimental City," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2018), pp. 73-92; Federico Cugurullo, "Urban Artificial Intelligence: From Automation to Autonomy in the Smart City," *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities*, vol. 2 (2020), p. 38; Katharina Mueller & Sgouris P. Sgouridis, "Simulation-Based Analysis of Personal Rapid Transit Systems: Service and Energy Performance Assessment of the Masdar City PRT Case," *Journal of Advanced Transportation*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2011), pp. 252-270.

of this strand of urbanization.[14] Built in a previously underdeveloped area of Abu Dhabi, next to Zayed International Airport, Masdar City mostly consists of cutting-edge infrastructure for testing a wide technological portfolio, including robotics, clean tech, and energy storage solutions.[15] Experimentation in Masdar City has been advancing at a fast pace.[16] It is here that scholars have noted one of the earliest manifestations of the transition from *automation* to *autonomy* in the contemporary city, whereby AI begins to take control of urban systems autonomously rather than merely executing automated protocols designed by engineers and computer scientists.[17] In this sense, a project like Masdar City has been at the forefront of urban experimentation, pioneering an "urbanism influenced by artificial intelligences", or in other words, an *AI urbanism*.[18]

However, critiques of these projects have focused on the tensions arising from the clash between the aspirations of modernity and the realities of specific geographical and cultural contexts. In the Gulf, such tensions relate not only to the environmental constraints of building large cities and sustaining sizable societies in a region with limited natural resources, such as freshwater.[19] They also pertain to the delicate relationship between Islam and modernity, as modern understandings of society can conflict with longstanding cultural perceptions and norms grounded in religion.[20]

The Line was initially proposed for completion in 2030. As an extensive corpus of literature on experimental urbanism suggests, such urban experiments are seldom built according to the original vision and masterplan, but it is important to note that, at the time of writing, the implementation of The Line continues in the region of Tabuk.[21] Therefore, in light of what the relevant academic literature suggests and, above all, MBS' significant financial and political investment in the NEOM project, it is likely that some version of The Line will ultimately materialize. Moreover, given that The Line is woven by the technological, political, and cultural terms of modernity, we can suggest that, whatever the emergent material form of the project, it will have repercussions on the infrastructure, politics, and culture of Saudi Arabia and beyond that will be difficult to control.

A Genealogy of The Line's Modernization

Despite being promoted by its developers as a groundbreaking novel model of urbanism, much of The Line is, in fact, deeply rooted in the past. The design itself, for instance, is far from novel. In the late 19th century, modernist urban planner Arturo Soria y Mata conceptualized a linear urban settlement that was subsequently built near Madrid where it can be still seen today, albeit since consumed by the expanding capital, and now forming a suburban district.[22] Echoes of Soria's vision can also be found in Soviet urban

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[14] Federico Cugurullo, "How to Build a Sandcastle: An Analysis of the Genesis and Development of Masdar City," *Journal of Urban Technology*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2013), pp. 23-37; Gökçe Günel, *Spaceship in the Desert: Energy, Climate Change, and Urban Design in Abu Dhabi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 10.

[15] Griffiths & Sovacool, p. 9.

[16] Federico Cugurullo, "Speed Kills: Fast Urbanism and Endangered Sustainability in the Masdar City Project," in: Datta Ayona & Shaban Abdul (eds.), *Mega-Urbanization in the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 78-92.

[17] Cugurullo, *Urban Artificial Intelligence*, p. 38.

[18] Benjamin Bratton, "AI Urbanism: A Design Framework for Governance, Program, and Platform Cognition," *AI & Society*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2021), pp. 1307-1312; Federico Cugurullo et al. (eds.), *Artificial Intelligence and The City: Urbanistic Perspectives on AI* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2023), pp. 11-71; Otello Palmini & Federico Cugurullo, "Charting AI Urbanism: Conceptual Sources and Spatial Implications of Urban Artificial Intelligence," *Discover Artificial Intelligence*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2023), p. 15.

[19] John A. Burt, "The Environmental Costs of Coastal Urbanization in the Arabian Gulf," *City*, vol. 18, no. 6 (2014), pp. 760-770.

[20] Jan-Erik Lane & Hamadi Redissi, *Religion and Politics: Islam and Muslim Civilisation* (London: Routledge, 2016); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, vol. 15 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Hamadi Redissi, *La tragédie de l'islam moderne* (Paris: Média Diffusion, 2011), p. 20.

[21] Cugurullo, *Frankenstein Urbanism*; James Evans et al., *The Experimental City* (London: Routledge, 2016); Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier* (Cambridge: The MIT press, 1982), p. 300.

[22] Michael Batty, "The Linear City: Illustrating the Logic of Spatial Equilibrium," *Computational Urban Science*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2022), p. 8.

planning of the late 1920s, as well as in the provocative architectural drawings of Superstudio's *Monumento Continuo* in the 1960s. The Line, therefore, is not the first linear city in history; rather, its design draws from an imaginary heavily influenced by Western ideals of urban modernity and an aesthetic preoccupation with geometric forms. In relation to three specific waves of modernization, namely technology, governance, and citizenship, and the way they intertwine in the development of The Line, the influence of ideas from a distant past continues to be strong.

One Western cultural and aesthetical movement in particular has significantly informed the genesis and development of The Line: *cyberpunk*. The culture and aesthetics of cyberpunk are rooted in Western science fiction of the 1960s, when Philip K. Dick's classic novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) contributed to the formation of an imaginary characterized by human and artificial intelligences populating high-tech urban environments. The cyberpunk genre was further solidified in the 1980s with the publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), where the themes of AI and its societal implications feature prominently. During the same decade, Ridley Scott released the iconic movie *Blade Runner* (1982), which was inspired by Dick's novel and grounded in the aesthetics of then sprawling megacities such as Hong Kong and Tokyo. The movie introduced a visual imaginary of cyberpunk cities characterized by monumental architectures, neon lights, and cutting-edge technologies, including flying cars and androids. This imaginary has been recently revitalized through *Blade Runner*'s sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and a blockbuster videogame *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), both of which have captivated younger generations and revived the cyberpunk movement.

That cyberpunk is at the core of the imaginary underpinning The Line is a fact that has emerged multiple times in the process of empirically researching the new Saudi megaproject, by engaging directly with Neom representatives through semi-structured interviews and published material by Neom, in Saudi Arabia and at international promotional events. More specifically, it emerged that MBS explicitly cited *Blade Runner* and its sequel as key references for the kind of city that he wanted to build. As one NEOM spokesman confirmed, this reference was communicated to the architects and concept artists tasked with sketching the initial vision of The Line, with the idea of informing the design process. It is therefore no coincidence that many of the technologies proposed for implementation in The Line, such as androids and flying cars, closely resemble those portrayed in Scott's movies.

Moreover, cyberpunk can be identified as a key influence on NEOM, as evidenced by the materials released by the project, and exhibited at international promotional events, such as the 2023 Venice exhibition. These publications articulate a distinct "punk language" for NEOM, as a kind of identifying ethos that distils and captures MBS' envisioned aesthetic for the project within a vernacular of disruption and break with the past. This ethos reflects a central imperative of modernisation, echoing Ezra Pound's slogan "Make it New".[23] As proclaimed by the developers, this punk genre of NEOM can be further divided into sub-genres, including "desertpunk", "dieselpunk", "solarpunk", and "nanopunk", among others, which constitute the inspirations behind NEOM's design.

And yet, the link between NEOM and punk within the context of governance in Saudi Arabia appears somewhat antithetical. The punk movement originally emerged in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1970s as a counter-cultural movement against the political establishment and conservatism, often manifesting through DIY interventions in the urban fabric and cultural products. Therefore, references to "punk" as a source of inspiration for NEOM and The Line suggest a detachment from the movement's historical roots, and a kind of empty deployment of "punk" as an aesthetic within the fantastical façades, without the depth of punk's political imperatives. The Line is envisioned as a city designed to fulfil and

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[23] Ezra Pound, *Make It New: Essays by Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934).

predict all citizens' needs, effectively leaving no room for DIY, make-shift, or low-tech interventions by its citizens.

The AI-city nexus is a prominent leitmotif in cyberpunk literature and the plan for the development and management of The Line resonates with it. The new Saudi city is technologically imagined as a high-tech urban system mediated by multiple autonomous AIs, a vision genealogically connected to cyberpunk works like *Neuromancer*, where Gibson anticipates a variety of human-AI relationships and stresses their complex evolution in modern urban societies.[24] In the fictional cities that Gibson depicts, the protagonists interact with robotic technologies such as gardening robots tasked with maintaining urban spaces. Some of these robots are controlled by a large-scale AI (named *Wintermute*, in Gibson's imaginary), akin to how a real-life AI system called *Neos* is supposed to function as The Line's digital brain. Above all, the cyberpunk movement emphasizes the socio-cultural relationships between human and AI, often remarking the differences between the human mind and machines, and presenting a seemingly homogeneous society in which androids are barely distinguishable from human beings. In this regard, The Line's futuristic societal vision of a polity composed of robots mirrors a typical cyberpunk topos.

This is a topos that, together with the other cyberpunk themes identified in this section, is grounded in a Western imaginary that appears markedly distant from Saudi traditions and culture. The issue of robotic citizenship is a case in point. While Western cyberpunk novels and movies have long pictured societies inhabited by humanoid AIs, Saudi society has historically embraced Islam as a *conditio sine qua non* for obtaining citizenship in the country. Within this socio-cultural context, the trend initiated by The Line to grant Saudi citizenship to a robot called Sophia, built by Hanson Robotics, marks a radical departure from local culture.

It is important to note that this extreme act of modernization is neither an isolated phenomenon, nor a purely cultural matter. Since MBS' rise to power in 2017, Saudi Arabia has undergone major cultural changes, including the diffusion of forms of entertainment, such as concerts and cinemas, that had been hitherto considered impure by Saudi clerics according to Wahhabi precepts.[25] These changes form part of MBS' broader effort to modernize Saudi culture and revamp its international reputation, which, in turn, is embedded within a broader politico-economic strategy aimed at diversifying the national economy by developing new industries comprising tourism, media, and entertainment.[26] The Line can be thus understood as one among several vectors of modernization through which MBS is reshaping Saudi Arabia. What makes this urban project peculiar is, however, its underpinning cyberpunk imaginary which bears little, if any, connection to Saudi culture and, in some ways, clashes against it.

Modernization In and Beyond The Line

Since cyberpunk has influenced the conceptualization of NEOM in ways that represent a deliberate rupture with Saudi Arabia's urban and cultural past, modernization appears as a double-edged sword: it advances technological, political, and cultural transformation, yet simultaneously promotes ideas and technologies that – due to their Western roots – may challenge substantial elements of Saudi traditions and culture. The Line, driven by modernity, possesses the capacity not only to modernize Saudi Arabia itself, but also to reshape how regions beyond the Gulf understand and utilize AI.

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[24] Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, "Stealing Kinship: Neuromancer and Artificial Intelligence," *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2014), pp. 69-92.

[25] Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2019), pp. 97-101.

[26] Anis Ali & Anas A. Salameh, "Role of Travel and Tourism Sector in the Attainment of Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia: An Analytical Study," *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2021), pp. 276-290; Daniel Moshashai et al., "Saudi Arabia Plans for its Economic Future: Vision 2030, the National Transformation Plan and Saudi Fiscal Reform," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2020), pp. 381-401.

The Line's ambitious path toward modernity can be divided into three strands. The first is technological in nature and concerns the extensive deployment of AI to modernize urban infrastructure. In this context, modernization is conceived as the autonomous management of urban systems and the delivery of services, with AI positioned as an active agent in the management of the city. For example, The Line's transportation system is supposed to operate autonomously through a wide array of cutting-edge technologies, including self-driving vehicles such as those designed by Volocopter – a German company specializing in autonomous helicopters that are currently being tested in Saudi Arabia. Another example pertains to aspects of The Line's supply chains, including energy and everyday consumer goods, which, according to developers, will largely be produced in Oxagon, another newly planned city in the Tabuk region. Oxagon is imagined as an industrial hub entirely populated and managed by robots tasked with producing essential goods for future NEOM inhabitants. From this perspective, the vision of modernization underpinning The Line is one in which the city is permeated by such an advanced technology that human are minimally involved while AI runs their environment.

The second strand of The Line's modernization concerns governance where, once again, AI plays a pivotal role in the developers' imaginary. The large-scale AI system, *Neos*, is envisioned as the central command structure overseeing every aspect of the city's infrastructure, as well as the network of subsidiary AIs embedded in autonomous vehicles and robots. Neos is conceptualized as a gigantic digital brain capable not only of seeing what is happening in the city, but also of predicting future developments through the use of advanced predictive algorithms. These algorithms process large volumes of data concerning urban activities and apply them to forecast the evolution of urban systems and services. Within The Line, this technology is being imagined as an instrument to modernize governance and proactively anticipate future scenarios and citizens' needs, as opposed to merely reacting and responding to events as they unfold. Examples provided by the developers include autonomous vehicles anticipating where and when citizens will need transportation, domestic robots predicting meal preferences, and algorithms forecasting potential criminal activities before they occur. In this sense, modernization in The Line is about using technology to have more pervasive control not only over the intricate coordination of urban mobilities and activities, but also over time itself, by extending governance into the future.

The third strand of modernization observable in The Line concerns the notion and practice of citizenship. Here, AI continues to serve as a common denominator in the recent Saudi efforts to modernize the country. Within the context of the NEOM megaproject, AI is conceptualized not simply as a technology or tool, but as a form of intelligence endowed with human-like qualities and, thus, seen as deserving rights comparable to those of human beings. The Line's vision of modernization anticipates a future society in which robots are granted citizenship and coexist with humans as urban inhabitants. This is not merely a hypothetical vision of the future; it reflects a concrete plan of action initiated by MBS in 2017, when the robot Sophia was officially granted Saudi citizenship during the launch of NEOM. In this sense, Sophia represents an actual expression of modernization aimed at transforming the Saudi society by pioneering unprecedented types of citizenship. Moreover, the original plans for The Line include a vision in which up to 50% of the population would consist of service robots, further underscoring the ambition to build a hybrid, organic-digital society. In this respect, The Line shows a powerful facet of modernity, wherein technological innovation triggers profound social and cultural changes, and AI challenges long-standing anthropocentric frameworks of social organization.

The three strands of modernization expressed by The Line present elements of novelty within the Saudi context and beyond. The philosophy of modernity often regards the past as a constraint on development and seeks to surpass it by establishing unprecedented dynamics of progress. From a

technological standpoint, the high-tech portfolio being developed within The Line, with a focus on AI, represents a drastic change compared to other regions in Saudi Arabia. The country has only recently begun to engage with smart-city initiatives, and – with few exceptions – its urban infrastructure remains relatively underdeveloped.[27]

Similarly, the use of AI and predictive algorithms in urban governance stands out as an exceptional strategy. While MBS has long invested in digital technologies and narrow AI, particularly within the realm of social media, as a means of consolidating his power,[28] the ambitions embodied in The Line through the establishment of Neos are without parallel in the Gulf. Furthermore, The Line's waves of innovation stand out even beyond the regional context. Saudi Arabia's strategic experimentation with AI in urban infrastructure and governance through the NEOM megaproject has few global analogues. The rapid pace of innovation and, above all, the sheer scale and ambition of NEOM, place Saudi Arabia at the forefront of AI-driven urbanism, alongside countries like China and the United States. Experiments in AI urbanism are now gaining momentum.[29] The extensive deployment of autonomous urban technologies planned in The Line resembles the modernization via AI currently underway in several Chinese cities.[30] Similarly, NEOM's use of predictive algorithms resonates with current practices of so-called anticipatory governance, which have recently emerged particularly in Asian authoritarian regimes.[31]

In these terms, Saudi Arabia is part of a nascent AI urbanism that, as a global urban trend, is reshaping the structure and management of cities on a planetary scale. The Line contributes to this shift through what is arguably the most ambitious urban AI experiment to date. In addition, it is pioneering unprecedented dynamics of AI urbanism, most notably through the case of the robot Sophia which marks the first case of robotic citizenship in history. The Line also functions as a socio-cultural experiment, one that challenges established conventions regarding the meaning and requirements of citizenship in the 21st century.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the development of The Line as a vector of modernization in Saudi Arabia, which is generating repercussions extending beyond the Gulf. Due to its experimental nature, the future of The Line is difficult to predict. Nevertheless, the project has already had an impact at both regional and international levels despite being in the early stages of construction. Internationally, by placing itself at the forefront of urban experimentation, Saudi Arabia – through NEOM – is contributing to the evolution of AI urbanism.[32] In many ways, this marks a continuation of the passage from *automation* to *autonomy*. However, The Line attempts to push this paradigm further by rendering urban infrastructure and urban governance fully autonomous. In addition, the case of Sophia denotes an unprecedented attempt to develop robot citizens

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[27] Yusuf A. Aina et al., "Top-Down Sustainable Urban Development? Urban Governance Transformation in Saudi Arabia," *Cities*, vol. 90 (2019), pp. 272-281; Abdulaziz I. Almulhim & Patrick Brandful Cobbinah, "Can Rapid Urbanization Be Sustainable? The Case of Saudi Arabian Cities," *Habitat International*, vol. 139 (2023), p. 102884.

[28] Andrew Leber & Alexei Abrahams, "A Storm of Tweets: Social Media Manipulation During the Gulf Crisis," *Review of Middle East Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2019), pp. 241-258.

[29] Federico Cugurullo et al., "The Rise of AI Urbanism in Post-Smart Cities: A Critical Commentary on Urban Artificial Intelligence," *Urban Studies*, vol. 61, no. 6 (2024), pp. 1168-1182; Otello Palmini & Federico Cugurullo, "Design Culture for Sustainable Urban Artificial Intelligence: Bruno Latour and the Search for a Different AI Urbanism," *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2024), p. 11; Aidan H. While et al., "Urban Robotic Experimentation: San Francisco, Tokyo and Dubai," *Urban Studies*, vol. 58, no. 4 (2021), pp. 769-786; Tan Yigitcanlar et al., "Artificial Intelligence and the Local Government: A Five-Decade Scientometric Analysis on the Evolution, State-of-the-Art, and Emerging Trends," *Cities*, vol. 152 (2024), p. 105151.

[30] Simon Marvin et al., "Urban AI in China: Social Control or Hyper-Capitalist Development in the Post-Smart City," *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities*, vol. 4 (2022), p. 1030318.

[31] Ying Xu et al., p. 3.

[32] Cugurullo et al., *Artificial Intelligence and the City*, p. 361

operating within a broader AI infrastructure. As urban geographical literature has extensively documented, such urban experiments are inherently problematic, risky, and often produce uncertain results.[33] Yet these are experiments capable of generating policy impact on future cities.[34]

Regionally, The Line is transforming a segment of Saudi Arabia's infrastructure by introducing new dynamics of AI-mediated urban governance and citizenship. In this regard, this paper has observed the influence of an imaginary grounded partly in science fiction, whereby new urban spaces and social structures are largely detached from the surrounding context. To some extent, this trend echoes existing practices in the Gulf where a rare combination of desert landscapes and the absence of large, ancient cities has often led local planners to draw inspiration from external models.[35] However, The Line's futuristic imaginary inspired by the recent promises of AI is also part of a broader zeitgeist, as urban policymakers worldwide are lured by AI urbanism and its ideology.[36] Overall, this scenario reinforces Molotch and Ponzini's[37] proposition: that the study of Gulf cities sheds light on both the changing nature of the Arab urban and, more generally, of cities in the 21st century.

With a focus on modernization, understood as a double-edged driver of change, this paper has emphasized the repercussions of The Line within Saudi Arabia. The new city is introducing some changes that are disconnected from the cultural traditions of the region. As this paper has shown, a cyberpunk imaginary largely rooted in Western 1980s culture has been central to The Line's design and conceptualization. In this respect, the Saudi project exemplifies a common issue in urban modernity: the formation of modern cities and urban cultures that remain insensitive to the cultural roots of the surrounding space. This issue has also manifested more broadly across the Arab world where Western cultural movements can clash with Islamic traditions and coalesce into a fragmented and unstable whole.[38] Viewed from this lens, The Line's cyberpunk character appears to foster cultural transformations that are misaligned with Saudi Arabia's traditional norms and practices.

The implications of such transformations should not be underestimated, and, in this regard, history offers valuable lessons for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf more broadly. In the 1930s, when King Abdulaziz Al Saud (r. 1926-1932), founder of the third Saudi state, introduced several technological innovations such as motor vehicles, not only to modernize the region, but also to consolidate his authority, he faced significant opposition from a group of Muslim fundamentalists. Some ulama regarded then modern technology as *bidʿa* – an innovation lacking roots in the traditional practice of Wahhabism.[39] This sparked a series of violent conflicts that persisted into the 1960s and 1970s. Notably, in September 1965, a television studio in Riyadh was attacked.[40] As Nevo notes, the protesters at times "were joined and even led by members of the state's ulama, who, despite being on the government payroll, feared that Western culture and technology would threaten the traditional Saudi-Wahhabi way of life".[41] As this paper has emphasized, there is little to no connection between the cyberpunk fantasies underpinning The Line and the traditions of Saudi Arabia. As MBS' project continues to expand and reshape Saudi culture, the question remains: will history repeat itself and lead to renewed conflict between those advocating for modernity and those who feel threatened by it?

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[33] Ali & Moser; Cugurullo, *Frankenstein Urbanism*; Van Noorloos & Kloosterboer.

[34] I-Chun Catherine Chang, "Failure Matters: Reassembling Eco-Urbanism in a Globalizing China," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, vol. 49, no. 8 (2017), pp. 1719-1742.;

[35] al-Khayyat, pp. 1-2.

[36] Cugurullo et al., *Artificial Intelligence and the City*, p. 361; Federico Cugurullo, "AIdeology: Unpacking the Ideology of Artificial Intelligence and Its Spaces," *Antipode* (2025), pp. 1-2.

[37] Molotch, & Ponzini, pp. 10-11.

[38] Redissi, pp. 100-101.

[39] Joseph Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1998), pp. 34-53.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., pp. 39-40.

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REFLECTIONS

Jerusalem Story Team

Jerusalem: A Closed City

القدس: المدينة المغلقة

Abstract: For millions of Palestinians, Jerusalem is a closed city. Entry is largely forbidden and only occasionally allowed for brief, limited periods with an entry permit granted at Israel's behest. Only holders of Israeli IDs (whether Jerusalem residents or Israeli citizens) have the right to enter the city, and even they must pass through checkpoints. This study explores how closure has barred generations of Palestinians from experiencing the cultural and historical nexus that served as the region's hub for hundreds of years. Since checkpoints have also been installed within the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, closure also imposes grave hardships on Palestinian Jerusalemites with Israeli permanent-resident IDs who live on the "other" side of the checkpoints.

Keywords: Palestinians; Jerusalem; Entry Permit; Checkpoints.

الملخص: بالنسبة لملايين الفلسطينيين، تُعد القدس مدينة مغلقة، فالدخول إليها محظورٌ إلى حدٍّ كبير، ولا يُسمح به إلّا أحيانًا لفترات قصيرة ومحددة بتصريح دخول يُمنح بأمرٍ إسرائيلي. يحقُّ فقط لحاملي بطاقات الهوية الإسرائيلية (سواءً كانوا من سكان القدس أو مواطنين إسرائيليين) دخول المدينة، وحتى في هذه الحالة، يتوجِّب عليهم المرور عبر نقاط التفتيش. لقد حرم الإغلاق أجيالاً من الفلسطينيين من عيش تجربة الترابط الثقافي والتاريخي الذي شكّل مركز المنطقة لمئات السنين. وبما أنّ نقاط التفتيش نُصبت أيضًا في نقاط داخل حدود بلدية القدس، فإنّ الإغلاق يفرض أيضًا صعوباتٍ جمة على الفلسطينيين المقدسيين حاملي بطاقات الإقامة الدائمة الإسرائيلية الذين يعيشون على الجانب الآخر من نقاط التفتيش.

كلمات مفتاحية: الفلسطينيون؛ القدس؛ تصريح دخول؛ نقاط تفتيش.

Introduction

From the time it occupied East Jerusalem in 1967, Israel began a long-term, gradual process of severing the city from its Palestinian past, present, and future to ensure permanent Israeli sovereignty. One critical and often overlooked aspect of this severance is the closure of the city to the millions of Palestinians who do not have Israeli citizenship or permanent residency. Closure means preventing Palestinian civilians – in this case, those living in the West Bank and Gaza with Palestinian Authority-issued Gaza IDs – from entering Israel (and therefore Jerusalem).[1] Israeli journalist Amira Hass reframes closure as "that euphemism for the policy of denying Palestinians their right to freedom of movement".[2]

Figure (1): Palestinians line up on a Friday during Ramadan in hopes of being allowed to pass and enter Jerusalem to pray, 17 May 2019

Credit: David Vaaknin for the *Washington Post* via Getty Images

By contrast, Jews living beyond the city borders have free and open access to the city at all times regardless of their point of entry and are never affected by the closure restrictions described here. From its innocuous beginnings, closure or restriction of access to Jerusalem has been solidified, intensified, and expanded into a system of full, comprehensive control made possible by the Separation Wall and a complex, detailed, and harsh permit regime taking advantage of modern technological advances used to monitor people. As Palestinian American media scholar Helga Tawil-Souri has explained:

> Closure is meant to deprive Palestinians of their right to free movement, stemming from a "pass system" first introduced in 1991 … The system turned a basic right into a coveted privilege with gradations: Palestinian society became (geographically) stratified on the basis of whether one had access, and in what portion, to the privilege of freedom of movement.[3]

Where previously East Jerusalem (and before 1948, Jerusalem as a whole) was the urban, political, religious, medical, educational, and commercial centre of the larger Palestinian West Bank, today around 4.8 million Palestinians (around 2.9 million in the West Bank and 1.9 million in Gaza)[4] are forbidden to enter Jerusalem at all unless they are granted an Israeli entry permit or are above a certain age in the case they are from the West Bank.[5] Obtaining this permit is linked to a series of Israeli "security" measures, and granting this permit is the exception, not the norm. Under this regime, only Palestinian males from the

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[1] Yehudit Kirstein Keshet, *Checkpoint Watch: Testimonies from Occupied Palestine* (London: Zed Books, 2006), p. 15.

[2] Ibid., p. x.

[3] Helga Tawil-Souri, "Qalandia Checkpoint as Space and Nonplace," *Space and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2011), p. 6.

[4] "Estimated Population in Palestine Mid-year by Governorate, 1997–2021," *Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics*, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/32bbpjky. Exact figures are West Bank – 2,921,170; Gaza – 1,932,843 (2018); West Bank – 2,986,714; Gaza – 1,989,970 (2019).

[5] "Status of Authorizations for Entry of Palestinians into Israel; for Their Passage from Judea and Samaria into the Gaza Strip; and for Their Departure Abroad," *Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories Operations Department*, 8/2/2022, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/4f8rjzsj

West Bank who are aged 55 and older and Palestinian females who are aged 50 and older [6] are allowed to enter Jerusalem and Israel freely without having to apply for a permit (provided they do not have a security record that has resulted in their being banned from ever obtaining a permit).[7] They can simply show up at the checkpoint and show their IDs. This fact has created a situation in which young Palestinians say, "The only reason we wish to grow older is to have the chance to see Jerusalem".

Figure (2): Aerial view of the Hizma checkpoint, on the western edge of the village of Hizma about 7 km from the Old City; this is just one of 18 checkpoints controlling access to Jerusalem

Credit: Shutterstock.

1967-1989: The Zone Is Closed, but the Closure Is Not Enforced

Laying the Legal Groundwork

On 7 June 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. On that same day, the army immediately issued a proclamation conferring upon its West Bank area commander "all legislative, executive, and judicial powers over the occupied territory" and that "the laws that were in force up to June 7, 1967, shall remain in force as long as they are not contradicted by subsequent military orders".[8] This directive did not, however, apply to East Jerusalem since, in contravention of international law, on 16 June 1967, Israel annexed Jerusalem proper as it had existed pre-1967 (6.5 km2) and then on 24 June 1967 unilaterally expanded the city area to include an additional 64 km2 (with 28 Palestinian villages) of the West Bank, thereby tripling the size of the city.[9]

Again in contravention of international law, on 27 June 1967 Israel passed the Law and Administration Ordinance (Amendment No. 11) Law, which applied its own domestic law, jurisdiction, and administration

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[6] "Total Population West Bank/Percentage of Elderly 60+ Year 2019," *Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics*, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/pzybyprz. A rough estimate of how many people can cross without a permit can be obtained using Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics data: Of 2.9 million Palestinians in the West Bank, 5.7% are aged over 60. That would be 170,242 people, but this is a conservative estimate because the relevant age bracket is 55+ for men and 50+ for women. Note that this "easing" for individuals of advanced age was first introduced in 2015.

[7] However, the ID is checked by computer at the checkpoint. If their name is flagged as having a "security record", they will not be allowed to cross. And the security record is not necessarily due to the individual's actions only. See: "Banned from Entry," *Jerusalem Story*, 2/5/2021, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/3mnecewj

[8] Jerusalem Media & Communication Centre, "Military Proclamation 2: Concerning Regulation of Authority and the Judiciary, June 7, 1967," in: Jamil Rabah & Natasha Fairweather (eds.), *Israeli Military Orders in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank 1967–1992*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: The Latin Patriarchate Printing Press, 1995), p. 1.

[9] Moshe Amirav, *Jerusalem Syndrome: The Palestinian-Israeli Battle for the Old City* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), p. 20. See: "Where Is Jerusalem? The Uncertain and Unfixed Boundaries of the City," *Jerusalem Story*, 20/11/2021, accessed on 29/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/5chak53-

to the newly expanded city (thereby cancelling the local law that had previously been in effect),[10] as opposed to the military law that prevailed in the rest of the now-occupied West Bank. However, the military legal system in the West Bank became the controlling factor that determined the ability of millions of Palestinians who did not hold permanent residency in Jerusalem to enter and exit the city.

Closure was a decisive means to effect Israel's larger geostrategic goals – namely, to retain control over the entire city and never relinquish it, and to ensure a Jewish demographic majority in the city in order to entrench its permanent sovereignty there.[11] All the subsequent gradual measures taken can be viewed in light of these overriding prerogatives.

First Closure and Census

On 8 July 1967, Israel declared the West Bank a "closed military area" from which entry and exit required the permission of the Israeli military commander.[12] Israel controlled all points of entry into this zone. Since then, Israel has gradually worked – whether by grand strategic design or by piecemeal reaction to events on the ground – to expand and intensify the severance of Jerusalem from the West Bank.

On 27 September 1967, Israel conducted two censuses in the newly occupied West Bank, including Jerusalem. This followed an earlier, flawed census that had been hastily completed in late June, only days after the war's end and before the city boundaries were even formally declared. Upon the censuses' completion, every Palestinian aged 16 and older who was counted was entitled to receive a blue-cased identification card with a pink hue unique to permanent residents.[13] Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza were given different IDs and had an altogether different legal status. This status meant Palestinians with Israeli permanent-resident IDs had different rights in terms of freedom of movement than did Palestinians with West Bank and Gaza IDs. One important difference was that those with Israeli permanent-resident IDs could freely enter Jerusalem, including West Jerusalem, and the rest of pre-1967 Israel.

These two events, the declaration of the West Bank as a closed military area and the census, "were the building blocks of one of the most elaborate systems for managing populations in the modern world, the Israeli permit regime for Palestinians", according to Yael Berda, an Israeli sociologist and human rights lawyer.[14]

"Silent Occupation"

In November 1967, Israel adopted then-Defence Minister Moshe Dayan's plan for a "silent" or "enlightened" occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.[15] The plan distinguished between the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and their Palestinian inhabitants. The Israeli government wanted to keep the land but not integrate its inhabitants, who were not even recognized as the owners of that land.[16] According to this logic, the Israeli army permitted free movement of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza during the daytime under specific controls. Thus, the 1968 Entry to Israel Directive required Palestinians from the occupied

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[10] Diana Buttu, *Fractured Lives: Restrictions on Residency and Family Reunification in Occupied Palestine* (Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, December 2015); "Transcript No. 126 of the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee Session Held Wednesday, 27 Sivan 5727-July 5, 1967 at 8:30," *Israeli Knesset Archives*, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/bdenx7zz

[11] Israeli political scientist Moshe Amirav, who worked under Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek, argues that Israel's policymakers set five "national goals" for Jerusalem: 1. Consolidate Israeli control over the territory by settling more Jews there; 2. Ensure a demographic majority and even a "uni-national" Jewish city by increasing the percentage of Jews there to as high as 80 to 90%; 3. "Israelize" the Palestinians in Jerusalem like the Palestinian citizens of Israel before them; 4. Obtain international recognition for Israel's sovereignty over the entire city; and 5. Separate the issue of the holy places from the Israeli-Arab conflict. Amirav, pp. 21-27.

[12] Jerusalem Media & Communication Centre, "Military Order 34: Order concerning Closed Areas, July 2, 1967," in: Rabah & Fairweather (eds.), p. 5.

[13] "Precarious, Not Permanent: The Status Held by Palestinian Jerusalemites (Pt. 1)," *Jerusalem Story*, 26/6/2021, accessed on 29/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/3xeaxsm9

[14] Yael Berda, *Living Emergency: Israel's Permit Regime in the Occupied West Bank* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[15] Ariella Azoulay & Adi Ophir, *The One-state Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 6. Azoulay and Ophir assert that these are the adjectives chosen by the "architects of the regime" themselves. Note that Berda terms it an "invisible occupation".

[16] Berda, pp. 17-18.

West Bank and Gaza Strip who wished to enter Israel – for whatever reason – to obtain a permit issued by the regional military commander.[17] In practice, due to the "open-door" policy, people were allowed to move without any permit between the West Bank and Gaza, between the West Bank and Jordan, and from the West Bank and Gaza into Jerusalem and, from there, into Israel. Their stay had to be short: between 1:00 am and 5:00 am, Palestinians were not allowed to stay inside the "borders of Israel", so overnight stays were not allowed. This was almost the only restriction, other than limited numbers of people who were restricted for security reasons.

1968: "Open-Door" Policy

In 1968, Dayan first advocated the "open-door" policy, whereby Palestinians would be allowed to work across the Green Line in Israel and goods would be allowed to cross the Green Line in both directions, with restrictions on the entry of Palestinian products into Israel.[18] This also allowed free passage between the West Bank and Gaza. In July 1972, this plan was made official when Dayan issued a "general exit permit" for Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza allowing them to enter Israel for any purpose and remain there from 5:00 am to 1:00 am of the following day without an individual permit from the military.[19] There were no checkpoints on the roads, but Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza were clearly identifiable by their different-coloured IDs and vehicle number plates.

The percentage of the Palestinian labour force from the OPT working inside Israel rapidly increased – from 6% in 1968 to 32% in 1974 and nearly 40% in 1987 before the First Intifada.[20] Note that although free movement was allowed, the legal status of the OPT did not change; the territories remained a "closed military zone". According to Berda, author of *Living Emergency: Israel's Permit Regime in the Occupied West Bank*, "The general [exit] permit did not change the status of the territories as closed military zones, but the closure was not enforced".[21]

Figure (3): Drivers of Israeli yellow-plated cars commonly sail by drivers of West Bank green-plated cars stopped in long wait lines at checkpoints

Credit: Anna Baltzer

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17 Ibid., p. 20.

18 Leila Farsakh, "The Palestinian Economy and the Oslo Peace Process," *Trans Arab Research Institute*, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/5x5fzy4b

19 "Israeli Legislation—General Exit Permit (No. 5) (Judea and Samaria), 1972," *Hamoked* [Hebrew], accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/5n8n28ss; Berda, p. 21. The "free movement" has several limiting conditions: 1. They can enter Israel and Gaza, but not Eilat (in the southern tip of Israel); 2. They have to carry their IDs at all times; 3. They are not allowed to move to Israel to live there; and 4. They are not allowed to open a business in Israel (only to work as employees). Specifically, "They are not allowed to work in Israel unless in a job that was offered through the office of Israeli labour in the area".

20 Neve Gordon, "From Colonization to Separation: Exploring the Structure of Israel's Occupation," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2008), p. 30.

21 Berda, p. 21.

1989-1993: Personal Entry Permits and Checkpoints Facilitate Restriction of Entry for Specific Individuals

First Restrictions on Entry

In 1989, as the First Intifada (1987-1993) was in its second year, Israel introduced new measures that enabled it to restrict some people from entering. In Gaza, Palestinians who wished to leave the Strip were first required to produce "magnetic cards coded with background security information".[22] Certain categories of people were not allowed to obtain these cards: released prisoners, former administrative detainees, and Palestinians who had been detained and released without charge.[23] In the West Bank, rather than magnetic cards, initially Israel used a different colour ID case (green versus orange) to differentiate those who were banned from entry.

In January 1991, on the eve of the First Gulf War, out of fear of a Palestinian reaction to it,[24] Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir ordered the closure of the OPT for the first time, for the duration of the war, and the general exit permit of 1972 was cancelled. In its stead, a permit regime was introduced, which remains in effect today. This means that every Palestinian who wished to travel from the West Bank to Gaza, or from Gaza and the West Bank into Jerusalem or Israel, had to apply for and obtain a personal entry permit from Israel. This meant "denial [of freedom of movement] to many and freedom of movement for the few".[25]

To enforce this policy in the Jerusalem context, Israel set up nine checkpoints, one on each main road entering the city. In effect, this closed the border between the territories and Jerusalem. From this point on, free access to the city would be limited to Palestinians carrying Israeli IDs (i.e. Jerusalem residents and Israeli citizens). For the first time, too, the closure also applied to foreign workers and international non-governmental organizations. However, at no time did these restrictions apply to Jews, regardless of their place of residence.[26]

Initially, the direct impact of the policy change was not too apparent. For the first two years, Israel issued many permits for relatively long periods, and restrictions were not deeply felt.

1993: Official Full Closure Inaugurates the Severance of Jerusalem from the West Bank

The late 1980s and early 1990s heralded some major local and regional upheavals that caused Israeli leaders to take stock. These included the First Intifada, which broke out in December 1987 and continued into the early 1990s (some would even say until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993); the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the First Gulf War that followed; the expulsion of 200,000 to 300,000 Palestinians from Kuwait;[27] the US administration's announcement of a "new order" in the Middle East following the expulsion of Iraqi troops from Kuwait; the US push to use the political capital generated by the war to restart the Arab-Israeli peace process; the Madrid Conference (30 October-1 November 1991); and a series of bilateral and multilateral negotiations that followed and extended into November 1993.

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[22] *Life Restricted: Freedom of Movement and Access Restrictions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory* (Jerusalem: St. Yves – Catholic Center for Human Rights, 2018), p. 6.

[23] "Closure," *B'Tselem*, 1/1/2017, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/43psxjz2

[24] Tawil-Souri.

[25] Amira Hass, "Foreword", in: Keshet, p. xi.

[26] Kate Rouhana, *The Reality of Jerusalem's Palestinians Today, Jerusalem Media & Communication Centre* (Ramallah: Abu Ghosh Printers, 2001), p. 34.

[27] Toufic Haddad, "Palestinian Forced Displacement from Kuwait: The Overdue Accounting," BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, no. 44 (Summer/Autumn 2010); Laurie A. Brand, "Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Summer 1995), p. 56.

After 1991, Israel gradually started to reduce the number of approvals for entry permits. Even from the start, "granting permits was subject to security consideration, which meant approval by the Shin Bet [Shabak] and, from 1995 onward, the police as well".[28]

On 14 March 1993, and after the death of 15 Israelis in different knifing and shooting attacks by Palestinians that took place inside the West Bank or Israel, Israel declared the partial closure of the West Bank and Gaza until further notice. On 30 March, the Israeli cabinet declared a full closure on Gaza, and the following day, on the West Bank. Not a single Palestinian could enter Israel and East Jerusalem except those holding Israeli ID cards (whether residents or citizens). No movement between Gaza and the West Bank was allowed.[29] This full closure lasted for four weeks.

Yitzhak Rabin, who was at the time serving as both prime minister and defence minister, made a televised statement to the Israeli public in which he detailed his plan to reduce "Palestinian terror".[30] He declared the full closure of the OPT and the bolstering of Israeli troops in the West Bank and Gaza to "prevent friction" between Palestinians and Jewish settlers. The closure meant that between 100,000 and 120,000 Palestinian workers would no longer be allowed to enter Israel to work. Rabin said, "I am allowed to keep the territories closed as long as necessary". At that point, Israel pivoted and started to employ foreign East Asian and East European workers, in order to make up for the loss of Palestinian labour.

This full closure not only prevented Palestinians with West Bank ID cards from entering Israel but also from entering Jerusalem. The 1993 closure inaugurated a new, intensified phase of the systemic severance of Jerusalem from the rest of the OPT. This meant blocking access to the economic, religious, cultural, educational, and health centres that Jerusalem uniquely offers for millions of Palestinians.[31] The days of free access to Jerusalem were over – any Palestinian with a West Bank ID caught in the city without a permit could now be fined or tried.[32]

Moreover, the closure also operated in the reverse: Israelis were now forbidden from entering the West Bank. In Israel's eyes, this included Palestinians with Israeli permanent-resident IDs, so they were forbidden from entering the West Bank without special permits.[33]

1995-2000, Post-Oslo: The Separation Regime Takes Shape

The First Intifada made it clear to Israel that the colonization strategy for the OPT was no longer viable. After some years, Israel opted for separation instead – "We [Israelis] are here, they [Palestinians] are there".[34] Neve Gordon, an Israeli professor of law who has analysed Israel's occupation, terms this a "reorganization of power rather than its withdrawal", and "occupation by remote control".[35]

The Oslo Accords were "an attempt to outsource responsibility for the occupied population to a Palestinian Authority".[36] In 1995, with the massive delegation of governance of the territories from the Civil Administration to the Palestinian Authority (PA) that emerged from the Oslo Accords, Palestinians

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28 Berda, p. 39.

29 Tammy Bash & Daphne Golan, *The Closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip: Direct and Accompanying Harm to the Residents of the Occupied Territories* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: B'Tselem, May 1993).

30 "Interview with Prime Minister Rabin on Israel Television – 30 March 1993," *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/4ax8pyr5

31 See: "Only in Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Story*, 15/11/2021, accessed on 29/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/2ratx3ww

32 Hass, p. xii.

33 Ibid., p. xiv.

34 Gordon, p. 35.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

with West Bank IDs would now apply at nine District Coordinating Offices (DCOs) for entry permits. The magnetic card was introduced as a prerequisite to applying for an entry permit, and became a major tool of control and information gathering.

With the massive pullback of the Israeli military from Palestinian cities, Israel needed an alternative source of information on the ground. Thus, from 1994 with the establishment of the PA and the permit system, and 1995 with the introduction of magnetic cards, Israel had the leverage to recruit the eyes and ears on the ground that it needed. Palestinians with West Bank IDs (which now became Palestinian Authority IDs, issued by the PA under Israeli's approval) had one more layer of permission and surveillance to plough through to enter Jerusalem.

In 1996, the first internal closure was imposed on the territories and entry to Israel became even more restricted.

2000-2005: The Closure System Expands and Extends to Control Movement within the West Bank As Well

The closure that was first imposed in 1991 was intensified in 2000, when the Second Intifada (2000-2005) erupted. Checkpoints began appearing everywhere and controlling Palestinians' movement even inside the occupied West Bank, including physical blockades around villages and banning of Palestinian vehicles on roads.[37] As of May 2002, the permit system covered all movement of Palestinians in the West Bank, including their vehicular movement. By 2004, there were 48 staffed permanent barriers (28 on the Green Line controlling entry to Israel), 7 manned control towers, and 607 blockades around villages.[38]

From October 2000, as well:

> The Shin Bet's [Shabak's] control over the permit regime grew exponentially … The expertise of determining whether Palestinians were friends or foes became an unassailable form of power. The definition of "security risk" itself was expanded to include many residents previously exempt. By 2001, the definition broadened from one devised to cope with a state of emergency into a permanent and institutionalized classification in the Population Registry.[39]

Adding yet another asphyxiating layer to the city's closure, the construction of the massive Separation Wall, including the "Jerusalem Envelope", began in 2002.

For many Palestinians with Palestinian Authority IDs, reaching Jerusalem became possible only in their dreams. Palestinians on both sides of the divide – those with and without Israeli IDs – were growing ever more remote from one another, even within extended families. Even Palestinians with Israeli IDs had reason to think twice before venturing outside the checkpoints and leaving the city. A university employee recalled one student's description of her daily bus ride from her home in East Jerusalem to her university in Bethlehem, through the checkpoints and back:

> The worst part is coming in the bus up to the checkpoint and wondering, what will it be like this time? Is the soldier just going to wave the bus through? Is the soldier going to take a look at our IDs? Or is the soldier going to take all our IDs and make us sit there for an hour, or an hour-and-a-half, while each of them is checked? Are we going to be herded off the bus and made to stand in the sun while all of our IDs are checked? Or are we individually going to be interrogated? Are we going to be strip-searched?[40]

37 See: "Checkpoints, Part 1: Severing Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Story*, 20/3/2022, accessed on 29/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/5aucb77w
38 Keshet, p. 14.
39 Berda, pp. 34-35.
40 Alexandra Rijke, "The Land of the Checkpoints: A Study of the Daily Geographies of Checkpoints in the Occupied Palestinian Territories," PhD dissertation, Wangeningen University, Wageningen, 2019, p. 33.

In this period, Israel began constructing the monolithic Separation Wall[41] that snakes throughout the West Bank and betwixt and between Jerusalem neighbourhoods. This wall, combined with the checkpoints and the permit system, enforces virtually a total closure – shutting Palestinians with Palestinian Authority IDs out of the city and making it much more cumbersome and difficult for those with Israeli IDs to engage with areas outside of it.

2005–2019: Separation Wall Entrenches Closure as Part of a Permanent Separation Regime

In 2003, the Israeli army introduced a programme called "Another Life". The stated goal was to "minimize the damage to the Palestinian life fabric in order to avoid the humanitarian crisis that will necessitate the IDF to completely take over the provision of food and services to the Palestinian population".[42] As part of this programme, which fell right in line with the separation regime paradigm, Israel undertook a worldwide study of border control technologies to identify ways to make the checkpoints "more efficient" and supposedly improve the Palestinians' experience of passing through them. It was also, no doubt, in preparation for how the continued control of Palestinian movement would operate once the Separation Wall was constructed.

The conclusion was that checkpoints should be recategorized into two types: "border" checkpoints that ostensibly control entry into Israel (although the majority are located inside the West Bank and not on the Green Line), and "internal" checkpoints that are located deep within the West Bank and control passage from one Palestinian part of the West Bank to another.[43]

As part of this plan, "12 permanent 'closure checkpoints' were to be built along the length of the wall, to be operated by the Israeli Airport Authority as if they were international borders".[44] This despite the fact that these "terminals" are located inside the occupied West Bank, on territory "that has never been acknowledged as Israeli land", even by Israel itself, in order to "define the future border in a unilateral way".[45] Moreover, the borders were not separating between two sovereign, independent countries but rather between two areas under complete Israeli control.

The rebranding of checkpoints as "terminals" was intended to "normalize" the checkpoints and "redefine them as civilian border-crossing points, identical to any other international terminal used around the world".[46] As explained by political scientist Daniela Mansbach, this was an effort to "normalize violence" and make a system of imposed military control appear routine. Appearances notwithstanding, as Mansbach explains, these "terminals" operate in an area where civil law has long been suspended, replaced by a "legal order based on military dictates",[47] that is, military law. In this zone, civil liberties are non-existent. The soldiers deployed at the checkpoints are "the sole authority for controlling and establishing the rules there", which "not only change every day, but a few times per day, without warning or explanation. As a result, no one – neither the soldiers standing at the checkpoint nor the Palestinians – knows in advance who will be allowed to cross on any given day".[48] There is no accountability, and "Israeli checkpoints are hidden, impenetrable to an external civilian gaze".[49]

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[41] See: "The Separation Wall: al-Jidar," *Jerusalem Story*, accessed on 29/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/y77ef9u3

[42] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2017).

[43] Rijke, p. 15.

[44] Weizman, p. 149.

[45] Daniela Mansbach, "Normalizing Violence: From Military Checkpoints to 'Terminals' in the Occupied Territories," *Journal of Power*, vol. 2, no. 2 (August 2009), p. 264.

[46] Mansbach, p. 256.

[47] Ibid., p. 257.

[48] Ibid., p. 258.

[49] Ibid., pp. 257-260.

Su-h new "terminal" checkpoints became operational in 2004. The Qalandiya Terminal that controls passage between Ramallah and Jerusalem was opened in 2005. Despite an attempt to portray a "normal" "border crossing" existing within an authority accepted by those affected, the structure of the new terminals and the dehumanizing control systems embedded within them remained firmly in place. To begin with:

> Architecturally, the "terminals" were designed to look like high-security offices or airport terminals. This new design has created a space where no guns or soldiers can be seen from outside the "terminal" – or even from inside, until one is standing directly in front of the checking booth … The architectural changes at the "terminals" have limited, rather than enhanced, the possibility of viewing what happens inside them … no one else besides the individual who is being checked at a given moment can observe the process.[50]

Hidden transactions remove any possibility of accountability, even from on-site observers. Indeed, as Mansbach experienced on the ground: "Their architecture … makes resistance almost impossible; the high walls and fences prevent the activist from seeing or communicating with the Palestinians who are trying to cross the 'terminal' or observing the events they are experiencing".[51]

Inside, the flow of movement and interaction is explicitly designed to dehumanize. As described by Eyal Weizman in his book *Hollow Land*:

> The new [terminal] system includes a labyrinth of iron fences that channels passengers en route to Jerusalem via a series of turnstiles. All commuters must go through five stages: the first set of turnstiles, the X-ray gates, the second set of turnstiles, the inspection booth and an X-ray machine for the bags. This entire process is captured by a dense network of cameras, and the passenger is given instructions via loudspeakers. From their protected booths, Israeli security personnel operate the revolving gates remotely, regulating the rate of passenger flow. The inspection booths are encased in bulletproof glass. The glass is so thick that it tends to reflect the outside light rather than letting it through, thereby obscuring the security personnel inside, and effectively functioning as a one-way mirror. Palestinians must insert their identity cards and travel permits into a small slot under the windows. Communication takes place through push-button speakers. Still in the process of installation, new detectors operated by biometric cards will eventually make even this minimal interaction redundant. After crossing this checkpoint, the passenger is allowed through another turnstile and then through the Wall.[52]

Figure (4): Workers line up in the early hours at Checkpoint 300, which controls the access from Bethlehem to Jerusalem

Credit: Delayed Gratification, as posted on the Public Intelligence website

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50   Ibid., p. 264.
51   Ibid., p. 267.
52   Weizman, p. 151.

Soon after, a new biometric card was introduced, which uses faceprints, handprints, fingerprints, and iris scanning to confirm the identity of the person passing through the crossing point. Thus, Palestinians rushing to get to work or school are sharing their uniquely identifiable bioprints with the Israeli Population Registry, which can then freely use them for surveillance in other arenas.

The new checkpoint/terminal concept was part of a larger effort to "rebrand" occupation in an attempt to normalize it. The terminals were proudly trumpeted as "humanitarian", using "humanitarian technology". Qalandiya and the other terminals have a "humanitarian lane" which is supposed to provide a less crushed crossing experience for those in wheelchairs, the elderly (people over the age of 60), and parents with baby strollers.[53]

Despite the terminology and the effort to make such terminals appear to be "customer-facing", the experience was anything but humanitarian, and the grim underlying logic of the closure remained firmly in place.

The fate of the "humanitarian lane" perhaps reveals the real story: checkpoint observers consistently report that it is typically closed and rarely used.[54]

Figure (5): Front entrance of the new Qalandiya checkpoint, now rebranded as a "crossing", 28 March 2019

Credit: Nir Alon, Alamy Stock Photo

2019: New "Crossings" Opened; System Remains Unchanged

In 2019, this rebranding accelerated with the construction of two entirely new "crossings": one at Qalandiya, the main checkpoint that Palestinians use to enter Jerusalem from Ramallah, and the other at Checkpoint 300, the main access point into Jerusalem from Bethlehem.

Although these "crossings", built by the Israeli army and the Civil Administration, are easier and more convenient to pass through, replacing five human-staffed windows with 27 automatic electronic gates[55] and reducing the passage time from several hours to 5-10 minutes, they do so at an ominous cost in surveillance capacity. To cross, a Palestinian must pass through an electronic gate that both requires biometric data (embedded in the magnetic card that must be presented to open the electronic gate) and a facial photo to

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[53] Weizman, pp. 151-152; Amira Hass, "The Humanitarian Lie," *Counterpunch*, 28/12/2005, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/yp9a5ezh

[54] Rijke, pp. 121, 158-159.

[55] Dima Abumaria, "In Bid to Ease Palestinian Mobility, Israel Upgrades Key West Bank Checkpoint," *The Media Line*, 21/2/2019, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/ybcu4cz2

verify identity via facial recognition. These two new "crossings" were only the beginning – Israel is in the process of installing facial recognition software at all West Bank crossings that Palestinians must use. By contrast, "such screening is not used at separate West Bank crossing points that Israelis drive through".[56]

The mass capture of biometric data by an occupying military power is particularly concerning given that this facial recognition software, developed by AnyVision, the Israeli facial recognition start-up, has also been reported to be used in "a secret military surveillance project throughout the West Bank … nicknamed 'Google Ayosh', for which the company won a top defense prize in 2018".[57]

Figure (6): New biometrically equipped checkpoints leave little alternative but to share biometric data with the authorities, 28 March 2019

Credit: Eddie Gerald, Alamy Stock Photo

Figure (7): Palestinians proceed through the new biometric turnstile at Qalandiya checkpoint, 28 March 2019

Credit: Eddie Gerald, Alamy Stock Photo

More importantly, the closure and permit system that Israel uses to control and constrict the mobility of millions of Palestinians remains unchanged; the control over all decisions on who can move, where, when, and how, remains exclusively in Israel's power without accountability or appeal; and the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who are blacklisted cannot even contemplate attempting to pass through these

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[56] Daniel Estrin, "Face Recognition Lets Palestinians Cross Israeli Checkposts Fast, but Raises Concerns," *NPR*, 22/8/2019, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/488957rx

[57] "Why Did Microsoft Fund an Israeli Firm that Surveils West Bank Palestinians?," *NBC News*, 28/10/2019, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/2zmu2wba

"crossings" because they would never qualify for a magnetic card in the first place.[58] The "modernization" is only cosmetic; the closure system continues to keep millions of Palestinians from reaching Jerusalem.

Figure (8): New fancy window; same old permit check, 28 March 2019

Credit: Eddie Gerald, Alamy Stock Photo

Today: What Palestinians with Palestinian Authority ID Cards Must Do to Access Jerusalem

Yehudit Keshet, author of *Checkpoint Watch: Testimonies from Occupied Palestine*, describes the process of applying for permits:

> The process of acquiring a permit may be likened to a game of snakes and ladders. The applicant scores one success, only to be plunged back to the beginning of the process by refusal at the next. Several accessories are required for this game, a game whose outcome is never assured, one that can become a matter of life or death.[59]

Obtain a Magnetic ("Smart") Card

The first step is to apply for a magnetic ("smart") card. This certifies that the holder has received "security clearance" from the Shabak and is not wanted for or suspected of intending to commit some offense. The application, approved through the local Shabak office via the DCO, takes ten days to process.

Magnetic cards are a requirement for most types of permits. Patients who require medical treatment and the first-degree relatives[60] who accompany them can get permits without smart cards. Others who wish to visit a patient in Jerusalem must first obtain a magnetic card.[61]

No reason is given for refusal. If the application for a magnetic card is denied, the applicant may not be allowed to reapply for several years.[62]

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[58] "New 'Terminals' at the Bethlehem and Qalandiya Checkpoints," *Mahsom Watch*, 1/8/2019, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/2hwxc6pp. See: "Banned from Entry."

[59] Keshet, p. 17.

[60] According to the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), "wherever the term 'first-degree relative' appears in this document, or in any other documents issued or authorized by COGAT and touching on the movement of people between the State of Israel, the Gaza Strip, and the Judea and Samaria area, it refers exclusively to the mother, father, brothers, sisters, children, and spouse, unless explicitly stated otherwise with reference to a certain individual criterion in a current document". See: "Status of Authorizations for Entry of Palestinians into Israel."

[61] Ibid.

[62] See: "Banned from Entry."

Acquire an Entry Permit

Issuing entry permits for Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is the responsibility of the Israeli Civil Administration, or what is referred to as the COGAT (Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories). The COGAT, a branch of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, is responsible for the implementation of the civilian policy and the security coordination of the Israeli government in the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinians must apply for entry permits in the offices of the COGAT that are generally called "Office of District Coordination and Liaison Office – DCL" (*Matak* in Hebrew; commonly called DCO in English; and *Irtibāṭ*, or *Irtibāṭ ʿAskarī*, in Arabic). There are several Israeli DCL (IDCL) offices in the West Bank and two in Gaza, although the Erez crossing in the north is the central point of entry and exit for pedestrians from Gaza and the only place where Palestinians in Gaza can apply for entry permits to Israel.[63] Since the Oslo Accords, the permit application is first made through the Palestinian DCL, acting purely as a conduit for the IDCL.

To start, even reaching the nearest DCL office may require crossing one or more checkpoints. Once there, the experience is anything but inviting:

> Tamar Goldschmidt of Checkpoint Watch has videotaped the application process at two West Bank IDCLs. Each video, shot in real time, documents the trying physical conditions: endless waiting periods, lack of adequate shelter, toilets and refreshment facilities. Clerks sit behind narrow slits of the unreceptive reception counters at which the plaintiff has no redress, no agency and very little hope. Applicants must be constantly on the alert to spot the rapid opening and closing of the counters. If missed, the opportunity is lost for the day. Complaints usually result in the closing of the DCL for several hours, or for the remainder of the day. The waiting seems the longer because of the uncertainty as to when it will end and what its results will be. The very request for a permit is regarded as suspect, as insolence.[64]

Adding insult to injury, there is a good chance one could be asked to collaborate in return for the permit. Declining such an "invitation" could get you blacklisted.[65] In total, the permit application generally takes from two days to around two weeks.

The issuance of entry permits for Palestinians is based on the "Citizenship and Entry to Israel Law – 2003", but it is the responsibility of another office of the COGAT. All criteria set by Israel for the movement of Palestinians and applying for the permits are detailed in a document called "Unclassified Status of Authorizations for the Entry of Palestinians into Israel, Their Passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and Their Travel Abroad".[66] This document is periodically updated and published by the COGAT, only in Hebrew. As of this writing, the document was last updated on 19 February 2020.[67] An unofficial English translation (not necessarily the most recent) is available on GISHA's website.[68]

In reality, according to Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, "Israel grants permits sparingly, and does not publicize the criteria for obtaining them".[69]

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[63] "Procedures of Palestinians' Entry to Israel," *Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories* [Hebrew], April 2015, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/4eax5tm2; "Kerem Shalom Crossing," *Gisha*, 3/3/2020, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/27v54z3n. Kerem Shalom crossing in the south is Gaza's main commercial crossing and is the "designated point of entry and exit for equipment and goods from Israel to the Gaza Strip and vice versa".

[64] Keshet, p. 20.

[65] See: "Banned from Entry."

[66] "Unclassified Status of Authorizations for Entry of Palestinians into Israel, for Their Passage from Judea and Samaria into the Gaza Strip, and for Their Travel Abroad," *Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories* [Hebrew], accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/ycyhdh5n

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Naama Carmi, *Oslo Before and After: The Status of Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (Jerusalem: B'Tselem, May 1999).

Apply for One of the Designated Permit Types

According to this COGAT "Status of Authorizations" document, there are eight different categories of permits divided according to the applicants' needs. Therefore, only needs falling into one of these categories can justify applying for an entry permit:

•	Health needs;

•	Legal needs;

•	Education needs;

•	Work needs;

•	Economic needs;

•	Worship and religious needs;

•	Senior Palestinian officials (VIPs);

•	Special needs.

Under each category, there are several types of permits. In fact, there are more than 100 types.[70]

The most common ones are those allowing holders to work in Israel, but only within a small number of defined professions (construction, home construction, and agriculture have the largest quotas of any permit type). Others are health permits, which include permits for patients who need treatment in Israeli hospitals or Palestinian hospitals inside Jerusalem, and they also include permits for the first-degree relative who accompanies the patient. In the case of worship permits, these are permits given for Christian Palestinians during Easter and Christmas, and others given for Muslim Palestinians during the holy month of Ramadan and the Eid al-Adha holiday.

If a permit is granted, it specifies the duration of stay; whether the permit covers the person, a vehicle, or both; expiration date for the permit; which zone of Israel he or she is restricted to visiting; and in many cases which checkpoint the holder is required to use.[71]

Do not Expect to Have a Say in the Permit Duration

Different types of permits vary in duration from single-day entrance to longer-term permits for medical treatment at hospitals, for example. The standard permit specifies the exact time the holder is allowed to be in East Jerusalem (or Israel more generally), from 7:00 am typically until 7:00 pm, and in some cases until midnight. Workers inside Israel typically hold permits that are valid for a couple of months, but they are only allowed to enter on a workday and during the specific hours indicated in the permit. Those who want permits that allow for an overnight stay must indicate this in their application. However, overnight stays are rarely allowed. The permit also specifies the exact allowed zone (e.g. Jerusalem zone only), which prevents the holder from going any further into the country than absolutely necessary.

Leave the Car Behind

As of 1992, the entry permits covered only the person, not his or her vehicle. Until today, a separate entry permit is required for a vehicle. In any case, with only rare exceptions, cars with green licence plates from

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[70]   Chaim Levinson, "Israel Has 101 Different Types of Permits Governing Palestinian Movement," *Haaretz*, 23/12/2011, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/4mwkupju; Nasser al-Qadi, *The Israeli Permit Regime: Realities and Challenges* (Bethlehem: The Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem, 2018).

[71]   See: "Checkpoints, Part 1."

the OPT are not allowed into East Jerusalem or Israel.[72] A Palestinian with a Palestinian Authority ID who holds a permit to enter Israel is not allowed to drive any car, his or her own or another's, inside Israel. Thus, all checkpoints controlling access into Israel (so-called border checkpoints, even though they are located within the West Bank and not on any official border) can only be crossed on foot by holders of Palestinian Authority IDs. Beyond the checkpoint, if wheels are needed, the driver must have an Israeli ID.

However, in their attempt to reduce potential resistance through presenting so-called economic easing steps, the Israeli Civil Administration now allows a small number of specific people to enter Jerusalem with their Palestinian-plated cars. This mainly includes holders of the so-called VIP documentation. VIP refers to Palestinians holding senior positions in the PA who can apply for a one-year entry permit that also allows them to stay overnight in Israel and to drive their own Palestinian car inside Israel. A strict quota limits the number of people who can hold such a permit.[73]

Figure (9): Yellow-plated (Israeli) cars wait in line to cross the Israeli-controlled Qalandiya checkpoint, 3 October 2017. Only yellow-plated cars are allowed to drive through the checkpoint. All other persons must disembark from any vehicle, cross by foot, and re-enter a yellow-plated vehicle on the other side of the checkpoint

Credit: Debbie Hill, UPI via Alamy Stock Photo

The permit allowing the holder to drive one's own car can also be granted to senior Palestinian doctors who work either in Israeli hospitals or in Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem.

This is not to say that some checkpoints controlling access into Israel do not have car lanes – they do. But only cars with Israeli yellow plates driven by foreigners holding foreign passports or Israeli IDs are allowed to use them. There are also "border" checkpoints that are designed only for cars. The Tunnels, al-Walaja, and Hizma are examples. Jewish settlers can drive freely through these checkpoints without any type of permit or security check. Palestinians with Israeli IDs who drive Israeli yellow-plated cars also have this privilege, in theory. In actuality, they are frequently stopped, but the decision to stop and check them relies purely on the soldier's instinct.[74]

But the only way a Palestinian with a Palestinian Authority ID can cross these vehicular "border" checkpoints is in a public Palestinian bus. Everyone on the bus is subject to a documents check.

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[72] Rouhana, p. 36.
[73] "Unclassified Status of Authorizations for Entry of Palestinians into Israel," pp. 49-50.
[74] Rijke, pp. 248-256.

Quotas and Other Limitations

As detailed in the COGAT "Status of Authorizations" document, some types of permits have specific quotas. For example, the number of permits allowed for teachers working at schools in East Jerusalem, divided by religion, is 400 (Muslim) and 150 (Christian). Only 50 Palestinians are allowed to hold permits to graduate studies in Israel (and a "smart card" is required), while the Israeli health sector is limited to granting only 270 work permits. By contrast, the construction industry can grant as many as 26,000 work permits, and 39,300 for home construction.[75]

As well, some of the categories have detailed other limitations. For example, of those 120 persons who are qualified to receive an entry permit for VIP-1 (senior positions close to the president), only 50% (60 people) will be granted authorization to drive a vehicle into Israel. For the level of VIP-2 (quota: 240), the number of permits for vehicles drops down to 30% (72 people).[76]

The "Eased Restrictions" during Ramadan

Figure (10): An Israeli soldier motions to Palestinians waiting to cross the Qalandiya checkpoint from Ramallah to Jerusalem, to pray at the al-Aqsa Mosque on the last Friday of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, 8 June 2018

Credit: Debbie Hill, UPI via Alamy Stock Photo

During Ramadan, Israel often announces an easing of closure restrictions. These measures are approved by the minister of defence and announced by the COGAT. They are translated into Arabic and published on the Arabic Facebook page of al-Monaseq.[77] These include:

1. **During the holy month of Ramadan, allowing men under the age of 16 and those over 40 (or sometimes 50) and women of all ages to enter Jerusalem without an entry permit on Fridays.** (Sometimes this includes Palestinians from Gaza, but rarely.)

2. **During the Islamic Eid al-Fitr holiday, issuing thousands of entry permits to married couples for the purpose of family visits.** This includes Palestinians whose families are divided between the West Bank and Jerusalem or between the West Bank and Israel (e.g. someone who happened to live

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[75] "Unclassified Status of Authorizations for Entry of Palestinians into Israel," pp. 34-37.

[76] Ibid., p. 49.

[77] Al-Monaseq is the official Arabic Facebook page of the COGAT. It was established in 2016 as part of the Israeli Civil Administration to address the Palestinians. It became one of the media outlets through which Israeli officials publish news to the Palestinians. On several occasions, Palestinian activists have called for boycotting the page.

in Ramallah but is visiting his uncle's family in Jerusalem). Giving them entry permits during the holiday means they finally get the opportunity to visit their relatives across the Separation Wall or the Green Line. Usually, Palestinians take advantage of these exceptional permits and go to somewhere like Jaffa to enjoy the sea, something that most Palestinians in the West Bank are unable to do.

3. **Allowing some Palestinians to travel through Ben Gurion Airport.**[78] After closure was imposed in 1993, Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip were no longer allowed to travel through Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. Ever since, a Palestinian from the West Bank who wishes to travel abroad has to cross the borders to Jordan via the Allenby Bridge, and then depart through Jordanian airports. A Palestinian from Gaza has a much harder time of leaving, since he or she has to exit the Strip through the border point to Egypt and then fly from Egypt. The Rafah checkpoint with Egypt opens only sporadically, and whenever it is open, only a specific number of passengers are allowed to cross on any given day. This means long periods of waiting for a chance to cross. During periods of "eased restrictions", a specific number of Palestinians (around 500, and mainly from the West Bank) are allowed to travel for holidays during Eid al-Fitr. Usually those granted this privilege include senior businessmen, doctors, and others who are not blacklisted.

These eased restrictions are applied during the month of Ramadan in some years, but they can also be cancelled without warning in the event of violence.[79]

Gaza is generally excluded from these "eased restrictions". However, in 2014, the Israeli army allowed 500 Muslim Palestinians from Gaza, both women and men, aged over 60, to visit al-Aqsa Mosque on the Islamic holiday Eid al-Adha from 5-7 October.[80]

When the authorities fear the waiting crowds might be getting out of control, they bring in the heavy reinforcements.

"Infiltrating" Jerusalem without an Entry Permit

Palestinians who have been blacklisted and know they will not be approved for entry permits try to devise different creative and sometimes dangerous ways to sneak into Jerusalem without a permit. The most common way is to climb over the Separation Wall at a point where Israeli monitoring is less comprehensive, or where there's a hole in the wall. This becomes frequent during the holy month of Ramadan, because Palestinians want to pray during this month at their holy sites.

For example, Palestinian youth who cannot get into Jerusalem because they are not granted entry permits (whether because they have been blacklisted or they do not have an "allowed" reason for going to the city) might travel to al-Ram neighbourhood, north of Jerusalem, where they use a ladder to climb the wall and cross over into Beit Hanina neighbourhood on the "Jerusalem" side. Usually, the Israeli police are waiting on the Beit Hanina side to arrest those who are unable to run away. The youths are typically arrested for a couple of days and then released, or they get transferred back to the West Bank. They can also be fined or beaten.

Sometimes, their eagerness to visit the holy city costs them their lives. During Ramadan in 2019, the Israeli army shot and killed a Palestinian teenager from Hebron while he was trying to pass through a hole

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[78] "Which Civil Measures Will Be Taken for Ramadan?," *Israeli Ministry of Defense*, 22/4/2019, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/5555c583

[79] "3 Shuhadāʾ fī ʿAmaliyyatay Ṭaʿn wa-Iṭlāq Nār bi-l-Quds," *Ultra Sawt*, 16/6/2017, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/bdryt65d; "Baʿd 'Waʿd al-Burāq': Tarḥīl Ālāf al-Filasṭīniyyīn min al-Quds wa-l-Aqṣā ʿalā Washk al-Infijār," *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 18/6/2017, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/5cjcrdm7

[80] "IDF Public Announcement: Arrangements for Eid al-Adha," *Hamoked* [Hebrew], 1/10/2014, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/3369h5h8

in the wall south of Jerusalem.[81] During Ramadan in 2015, another 19-year-old Palestinian was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers while trying to cross into Jerusalem by climbing over the wall.[82]

Figure (11): In al-Ram, near the Qalandiya checkpoint between the West Bank city of Ramallah and Jerusalem, Palestinians climb over the Separation Wall to reach Jerusalem in order to attend the Friday prayer at al-Aqsa Mosque on the second Friday of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, 26 June 2015

Credit: Oren Ziv, Activestills

Conclusion – Jerusalem: A Closed City

This study has briefly surveyed the evolution of the closure policy, focusing on Israel's control over Palestinians' ability to access Jerusalem. As Amira Hass has written:

> In 1991 the closure policy was introduced as a bureaucratic/logistic measure in order to contain the first Intifada. It then developed as a means of demographic separation between Jews and Palestinians (and not a political-geographical separation between two political entities, as was wrongly assumed).[83]

While closure began to "close" the West Bank, it quickly had the effect of closing Jerusalem to Palestinians outside of it as well. This effect was not only physical but also mental. Even as far back as 1999, Salim Tamari, a Birzeit professor, related in an interview at the time:

> Periodically, I ask my undergraduate students how many have been to Jerusalem. Over half have never, never been to Jerusalem! They have not visited the city. They have no idea what it looks like except from TV. Can you imagine? It is insane! It is the one big city in the whole country, and they have not been to it. Then I ask those who have been when was the last time they went – generally it is a year, two, three years ago.[84]

Issam Nasr, another Birzeit faculty member and Ramallah resident who works in Jerusalem, described a student's first visit to Jerusalem. "First, she had no idea at all how to get around. Then, her father equipped her with the mobile phone and insisted that she check in with him every 30 minutes. It was as if she was entering enemy territory".[85]

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[81] "Egregious Shootings Receive Official Backing Once Again: Israeli Border Police Kill 15-Year-Old and Wound Another Palestinian as They Tried to Cross Separation Barrier," *B'Tselem*, 24/6/2019, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/2zhptaym

[82] "Photos: Palestinians Climb Over the Wall into Jerusalem for Ramadan," *+972 Magazine*, 5/7/2015, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/ytj4at28

[83] Hass, p. xiv.

[84] Rouhana, p. 35.

[85] Ibid.

And one Jerusalemite who has owned a large factory in Ramallah since 1982 but still lives in Jerusalem says, "It seems that the new generation of Palestinians, those under 10 years old, were brought up with this reality of checkpoints being there, part of the geography of the territories and of the daily routine of life. This is a political sign, not a security issue: It is making the statement that Jerusalem citizens are not really Palestinians, in a way".[86]

Nearly three decades have passed since Jerusalem was first closed to Palestinians from the OPT. This aspect of Israel's control of the city often goes under the radar. But such prolonged and profound closure has drastically and artificially altered the city's demographic make-up and its identity, our main concern in this study.

Closure has severed connections between the city and its surroundings that were deep and organic for centuries. It has hollowed out, disconnected, and isolated the Palestinian community that remained in the city by virtue of having residency. It has discouraged Palestinians with Jerusalem residency from venturing out of the city to study at nearby Palestinian universities (a situation greatly exacerbated by the Separation Wall).

It has meant that an entire generation of Palestinians – or even two – has grown up viewing Jerusalem as part of a foreign country, as inconceivable as the unreachable sea.

Cities are meant to pulse with life and take oxygen from all who arrive and engage with them, and from all those living in their environs. Cities should be organically connected to their surroundings and grow outward to meet them. A closed city is an aberration that is not sustainable. A city that is closed to one people but open to another is an apartheid city.[87]

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[86] Ibid.

[87] "A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid," *B'Tselem*, 12/1/2021, accessed on 24/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/vkyzvd2f

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Mostafa Minawi[*]

The Whitewashing of History in a Time of Genocide

التعتيم على التاريخ الفلسطيني في فلسطين

This summer, I led a series of workshops at Hebron University in al-Khalil (Hebron), Palestine, on the use of Ottoman archival records in the writing of Palestinian history.

My time in al-Khalil during an active genocide against Palestinians left me wondering if there is a role for historical education to play in Palestine in understanding colonialism, dispossession, and the violence of occupation. Anybody who has spent time in the West Bank knows that the unrelenting violence of occupation and ethnic cleansing are part of the grinding daily lived experience of every single Palestinian, from the day they are born. This violence shows up in a myriad of ways: Whether it is growing up in a household where one or more members of your family are disappeared, the sting of fractured ribs from rubber bullets hidden under your well-pressed school uniform, the smell of pepper gas and the sounds of stun grenades when the Israeli military raids your school, the house demolitions in your neighbourhood, the inability to predict how long a ride to school could take because of the arbitrary road closures, the salaries of your parents who work in the public sector which are almost never paid in full under orders from the Israeli government to ensure there is no ability to plan for the near or distant future or meet the needs of daily life, the heartbreak of not being allowed to access your farmland, your house, or even family members because of Israeli governments' blockades, walls, occupation, or violence by illegal settlers who live sometimes as close as across the street from you.

So, you can imagine my surprise when I learned that the history of this ongoing form of colonial violence was being whitewashed in history books, even in the West Bank.

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When I first arrived at Hebron University, I had hoped that I would be able to read some of the Ottoman language documents with the attendees. However, since most attendees did not know Turkish, reading Ottoman documents together proved challenging, and I began to feel like I was losing the audience. For the second session, I dug deep into some of the records that I have collected over the years to find examples of documents that would be of interest to local graduate students and academics. A couple of the documents I had procured dealt with Theodor Herzl's attempts at bribing the Ottoman palace and their rejection of his offer.

When I announced that after the break, we would be reading some correspondence between Herzl and the Ottoman government, some people in the audience looked at me with blank expressions on their faces. I was unsure if I was pronouncing it correctly. I was lecturing in Arabic, after all, and was using the English pronunciation of his name. So, I paused and decided to say "Herzl" as it was written in Ottoman-Turkish. So, I repeated it with more drama, "Herchel!" Same stares. What was I missing?

Finally, one among the audience broke the silence with: "Who is Herzl?"

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I was not prepared for this question. A question about Herzl, the founder of the Zionist project and, arguably, the single man whose advocacy of settler colonialism in Palestine has turned the lives of Palestinians upside down, with increasingly violent consequences that continue until today! So, how was it that Herzl was not a household name? I was not sure what to say. I looked around at the older faces in the audience for reassurance. During the break, the older faculty members in the audience assured me that this is just the historical ignorance that many in the younger generation of Palestinians in the West Bank suffer from these days.

However, that was not reassuring at all.

In a later conversation with two colleagues – a retired historian who participated in the writing of the current official history curriculum for high schools in the West Bank and a scholar of modern Palestinian history and literature – they explained to me what happened. After the Oslo Accord, the EU-funded official social science and humanities curriculum in Palestinian schools had to meet strict censorship oversight, which required the downplaying of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, Zionism as a settler colonial ideology, and even the history of resistance to the ongoing occupation, with long-term consequences: a generation that does not understand the history of the colonial violence they have to contend with.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

A carefully curated, and at times whitewashed, telling of the history of Israel and Palestine is not unique to the Occupied Territories, as those of us who teach the history of the modern Middle East in American universities know all too well. We often get students whose only knowledge of the history of Israel and Palestine is limited to what family members, religious schools, and the biased US media have told them.

So, my surprise was not due to the young people's ignorance of the history of Zionism and its settler colonial manifestation. Perhaps nobody knows its impact better than they do, whether they have heard of Herzl or not. In fact, none of these lived realities are ones that we can ever teach effectively in the US.

My surprise was about the level of investment by the government in Israel and the West Bank, supported by Western governments and institutions, to erase, rewrite, or simply withhold the history of this violence from their populations, with long-term consequences such as the one I witnessed. This way, colonialism and occupation in Palestine are rendered ahistorical, with no beginning and thus no hope for an end, suspended in time and space as if natural facts of life. The relationship of subjugation, occupation, and the experience of threat to life and livelihood become normalized. A historically contingent political ideology like Zionism, and its relatively recent history become mythical and almost untouchable. Any relief, regardless of how small it is, from being let through a checkpoint, to the release of a parent who was arbitrarily detained and disappeared, become acts of divine intervention, and not part of a historically contingent, man-made injustice that has played out in Palestine for almost a century.

This form of erasure tracks with the recorded bombing of the locations housing archives and libraries, and the pillaging archeological sites from Gaza to al-Khalil by Israeli, American, and European archeologists. Historical records, above and below the ground, are put in service of affirming a singular narrative which supports the violent dispossession of an indigenous people and severs their deep roots to the land.

The gatekeeping of historical records and the control of the resources needed to conduct research, write, teach, and make widely accessible are part of a silent war on Palestinians and Palestinian-ness. My time in al-Khalil forced me to connect the dots. Why else does the website of the Israeli national archives block Palestinian scholars in the West Bank from accessing it? Why do major EU-funded research projects such as the one by Germany on the history of "Ottoman Palestinians" of Gaza and al-Khalil collaborate with Israeli universities, and not have a single Palestinian student (from the diaspora or Palestine) on their

roster of researchers and research assistants? Why are books on Palestinian history confiscated by the Israeli border guards when entering the West Bank? Why are so many Western scholars with the resources to study and teach the history of Palestinians silent about this erasure, especially in light of the ongoing genocide in Gaza?

For those of us who care about Palestinians and the study of history, and understand the danger of its erasure, what are we to do?

Scholars, particularly scholars who work on Southwest Asia, we must: 1) include Palestinian scholars and students in our research; 2) devise ways to teach historical research methodology and historiography to Palestinian students; 3) find the financial resources necessary to give Palestinian students access to learning Ottoman-Turkish and other languages of archives that are accessible to them; 4) call out the gatekeeping of resources and erasure of history by facilitating historical research and the teaching of history **in Palestine, by Palestinians, for Palestinians.**

We cannot control the barriers that the Israeli government and its allies in Western universities put up. However, that should not deter us. What I have learned during my short time in al-Khalil is the importance of continuing to try, even if the results are incremental and the impact is temporary.

ARAB OPINION INDEX ANALYSIS

Laila Omar*, Wajd Beshara** & Nour Chibani***

Social Media Use, Trust, and Surveillance in the Arab Region: Insights from the Arab Opinion Index (2024-2025)****

استخدام وسائط التواصل الاجتماعي والثقة والمراقبة في المنطقة العربية: قراءة في نتائج المؤشر العربي (2024-2025)

Abstract: Drawing on data from the 2024-2025 Arab Opinion Index, this report explores evolving public attitudes toward social media across Arab countries. It examines how individuals use digital platforms to acquire and engage with news and participate in political and social discourse, especially in the context of ongoing regional conflicts. The findings reveal high levels of reliance on social media for information, alongside growing concerns over misinformation, censorship, and cultural harm. Despite widespread support for content regulation, many continue to use these platforms to discuss political and social issues. The report underscores the complexity of digital awareness and engagement in the Arab region and calls for more qualitative research to unpack public views on censorship, freedom of expression, and the impact of social media on political awareness and democratic values.

Keywords: Arab Opinion Index; Social Media; Misinformation; Censorship; Freedom of Expression.

الملخص: استنادًا إلى بيانات مؤشر الرأي العام العربي 2024-2025، يتتبع هذا التقرير تطوّر الرأي العام تجاه وسائط التواصل الاجتماعي في 14 دولة عربية. ويدرس كيفية استخدام الأفراد للمنصات الرقمية للحصول على الأخبار والتفاعل معها والمشاركة في الخطاب السياسي والاجتماعي، لا سيما في سياق الصراعات الإقليمية المستمرة. تكشف النتائج عن مستويات عالية من الاعتماد على وسائط التواصل الاجتماعي للحصول على المعلومات، إلى جانب المخاوف المتزايدة بشأن المعلومات المضللة والرقابة والخطر الثقافي. وعلى الرغم من الدعم الواسع لتنظيم المحتوى، لا يزال الكثيرون يستخدمون هذه المنصات لمناقشة القضايا السياسية والاجتماعية. ويؤكد التقرير على تعقد الوعي الرقمي والمشاركة فيه في المنطقة العربية، ويدعو إلى إجراء المزيد من البحوث النوعية لتحليل آراء الجمهور عن الرقابة وحرية التعبير وتأثير وسائط التواصل الاجتماعي على الوعي السياسي والقيم الديمقراطية.

كلمات مفتاحية: المؤشر العربي؛ وسائط التواصل الاجتماعي؛ المعلومات المضللة؛ الرقابة؛ حرية التعبير.

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Introduction

Survey data on social media use and public opinion in the Arab region point to a complex and evolving relationship between citizens and digital platforms. On one hand, reliance on social media for news consumption and engagement with current events has grown significantly. On the other hand, there is a marked increase in public scepticism regarding the reliability of the information circulating on these platforms, as well as growing concerns about censorship and control of information flows. Moreover, the increasing reliance on social media for information is unfolding against the backdrop of ongoing wars in the region – in Palestine, Lebanon, and Sudan – which appear to have further shaped how people interact with and perceive social media.

This report examines key trends in public opinion toward social media based on the latest wave (2024-2025) of the Arab Opinion Index (AOI)[1]. It focuses on the ways in which people use social media for social and political engagement, their concerns about misinformation, and their evolving views on censorship and surveillance. We analyse both the extent and nature of social media engagement, as well as public perceptions of its societal impact. We conclude with remarks on the potential implications of these developments for political engagement and attitudes toward democracy, and with questions that require further research on social media in the Arab region.

Internet and Social Media Use in Arab Countries

Since its first round of implementation, the AOI survey has documented the rapid increase in internet and social media use across the region. The 2024-2025 survey has been no exception to this trend. As Figure 1 shows, 82% of the population in the Arab region uses the internet to varying degrees, and 68% report using it almost daily. This data highlights the extent to which internet access has become as integral to daily life as access to electricity and water. Indeed, in some countries, it is often more consistently available than either. Tracking internet use over the years reveals a steady and significant increase: the percentage of those who use the internet to varying degrees rose from 42% in 2012-2013, to 61% in 2016, 77% in 2022, and 82% as of 2024 (Figure 1). The highest rates of internet usage at least daily were recorded in Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Morocco, and Kuwait, where over 80% of the population are daily internet users. By contrast, less than 70% of respondents in Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, and Mauritania reported daily internet use, with approximately one-third of the population in each country not using the internet at all. Overall, people were divided between using the internet daily and not using it all, and only a few – less than 4% on average – reported using it only weekly or monthly.

It is also noteworthy that over 90% of respondents reported accessing the internet via mobile phones, an increase from 88% in 2022. This highlights the increasingly blurred boundaries between digital and non-digital worlds. As described by many scholars, smartphones have increasingly become an "extension of the body",[2] reflecting a shift in how people connect to the internet.

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[1] The Arab Opinion Index is a public opinion survey conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies to gauge public attitudes in the Arab region toward political, social, and economic issues, including democracy, governance, and foreign policy. It is the largest social survey project in the Arab region in terms of sample size, geographic coverage, and thematic breadth. Since its launch in 2011, nine rounds have been completed. The 2024-2025 edition includes data from 14 countries. The total sample includes 35,218 respondents.

[2] Moran Quinn Ross & Joseph B. Bayer, "Explicating Self-Phones: Dimensions and Correlates of Smartphone Self-Extension," *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2021), pp. 488-512; Yue Lin et al., "Smartphone Embodiment: The Effect of Smartphone Use on Body Representation," *Current Psychology*, vol. 42 (2023), pp. 26356–26374.

Figure (1): Internet Use (2012-2025)
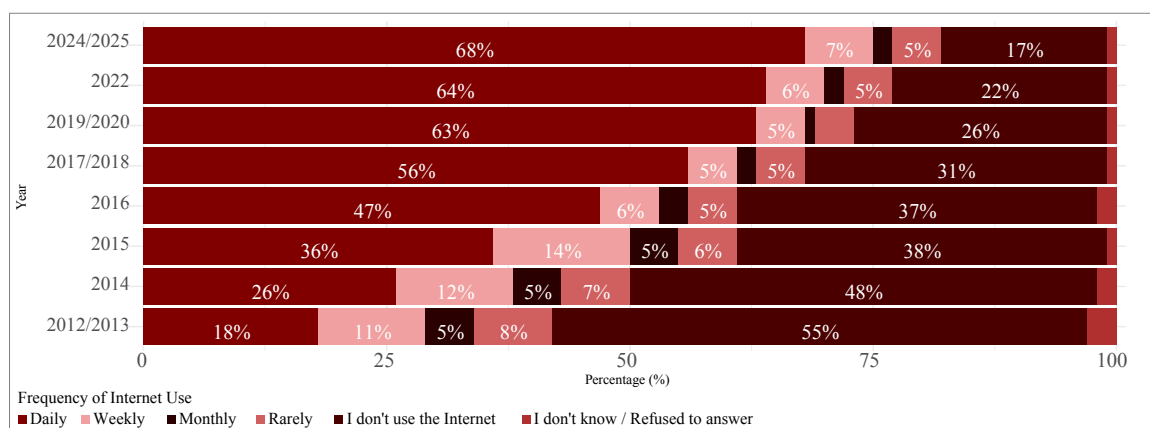
Most if not all internet users across the region report being social media users in 2024-2025. On average, 98% of internet users across the 14 countries studied have an account on at least one social media platform. As of this year, WhatsApp has become the most popular social media platform in the region, followed by Facebook, which saw a slight drop in the percentage of respondents with accounts. This shift may be explained by several factors. First, these results suggest that social media use in the region is becoming more centred around messaging, and less around other affordances of social media like content posting. The increasing centrality of private and group messaging has made platforms like WhatsApp more attractive for daily communication and news-sharing. In addition, concerns over privacy, disinformation, and algorithmic manipulation have contributed to a gradual erosion of trust in Facebook, pushing users toward alternative platforms perceived as more secure or less politicized. Lastly, platform-specific policies and accessibility issues, such as temporary bans or limitations, may also influence user behaviour and platform preferences across the region.

A large proportion of respondents (46%) expressed a preference for interactive posts and videos over written text (27%). This may be attributed to the overwhelming flow of information on local and global events, which fuels demand for fast, easy-to-consume content. In fact, following the news, staying informed about current events, and sharing opinions remains the second most common reason for using social media platforms, with an average of 24% of the population citing these motivations (Table 1). In this context, primarily chat-based social media, such as Telegram, has seen a remarkable rise in adoption: usage increased from just 8% in 2016 to 30% in 2022, reaching 44% by 2024-2025. Such growth could be driven by Telegram's recent role in Israel's ongoing war on Gaza, where it has served as a means to bypass censorship and access alternative news sources, particularly as various Palestinian armed groups have used it to communicate directly with audiences and provide real-time updates on developments during the war.

Table (1): Reasons for Use of Social Media Platforms

Primary Reason for Using Social Media	Algeria	Egypt	Iraq	Jordan	Kuwait	Lebanon	Libya	Mauritania	Morocco	Palestine	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	Sudan	Tunisia	Average
To communicate with friends and acquaintances	38	23.8	51.1	22.3	15.7	20.3	15.5	18.2	17.7	27.6	22.1	42.4	32.6	27.5	26.8
To follow and share political information and views	19.2	19.5	10.1	31.1	25.2	28.2	28.6	25.6	19.5	38.2	21.7	14.6	30.6	22.6	24

To fill spare time	11.8	15.5	16.6	18	9.8	16.7	7.9	8.4	11.4	10	8.2	6.1	4.2	10.6	11.1
To stay up to date with trending topics	7.5	11.3	4.7	5.3	12	4.5	12.5	15.3	7.1	3.1	16.2	10.6	7.4	14.7	9.4
To follow content I'm interested in	6.3	9.8	4.6	9.6	10.3	9.7	8.3	10.3	10.7	6.9	13.4	2.5	6.5	9.8	8.5
To share my updates with friends	3.1	7.3	2.4	6.5	8.4	9.1	7.5	8.4	9.7	5.7	9.2	2	4.8	3.4	6.3
To meet new people	5.5	5.5	5.2	0.8	4.7	3.4	0.8	4.2	7.7	1.3	1.9	8.1	4.1	3.2	4
For work or to promote my field of work	5.9	4.3	3.4	3.6	4.9	3.8	3.4	1.6	4	2.8	3.8	5.1	2.7	5.2	3.9
Refused to answer	2.4	0	0.9	0.2	2.2	1.1	10.9	0.8	2.5	1.2	1.9	7.1	3.5	0	2.5
Don't know	3.5	0.6	0.1	0.5	2.2	1.2	9.4	1.6	2.5	1.1	1.7	3	2.8	0	2.2
To become an influencer	0	0.9	0.1	0.6	3	0.1	0.8	2.1	4	0.4	1.3	1	0.7	0.5	1.1
Other	0	0	0.3	0.8	0	0	0	0	0	0.4	0	0	0	0.5	0.1

Social Media Use in Light of Current Political and Social Issues

Across the Arab region, social media has become a central mode of political news consumption and expression. The survey reveals that 82% of users report turning to social media, albeit to varying degrees, to access political news and information. Over time, the proportion of people using social media to follow political news has increased from 75% in 2022 to 82% in 2025 (Figure 2). When asked about their primary source for news content in general, social media ranked as the second most popular option amongst internet users (35.1%) after TV news channels (46%), as shown in Figure 3. The ongoing wars in the region, particularly in Gaza, Lebanon, and Sudan, likely explain the increased use of social media for following real-time political developments.

Daily use of social media for political news consumption is highest in Palestine, at 82%, compared to 42% in Iraq and 50% in Saudi Arabia. This can be attributed primarily to the ongoing war in Gaza and the continuing occupation of the West Bank, making political news for Palestinians an integral part of everyday life. The limited coverage provided by traditional, especially local, media outlets, along with a general lack of trust in mainstream reporting, likely contributes to the increasing reliance on social media as an alternative and more immediate source of information.

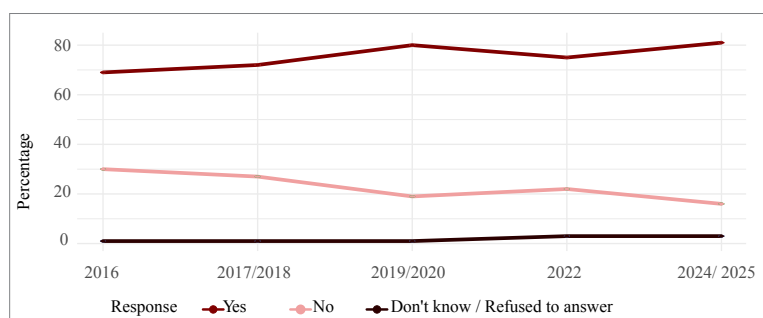**Figure (2): Use of Social Media for News and Political Information**
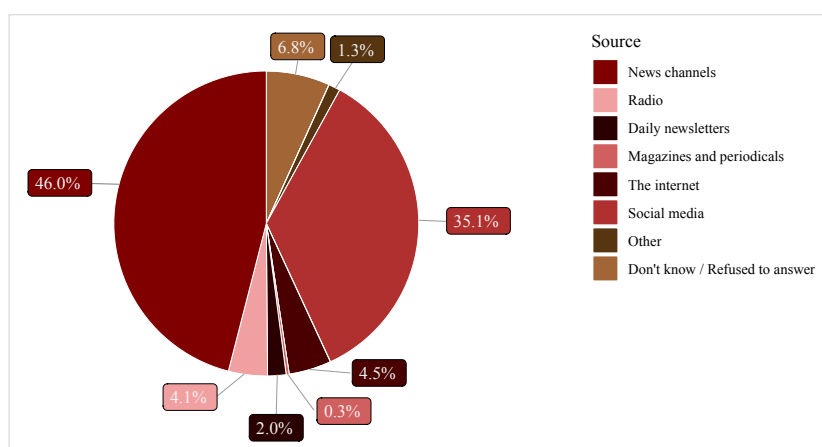

**Figure (3): Primary Source for News Content Among Internet Users**

The results also show that 72.9% of respondents use social media to, compared to 52.1% who report using it to engage with political issues across all the countries surveyed (Figure 4). These percentages reflect varying degrees of engagement, from daily to rare use. This gap can be attributed to several factors, most notably the widespread interaction with local social concerns that people may consider more directly relevant to them. Furthermore, it can stem from fears of surveillance or a sense of the futility of expressing political opinions in authoritarian contexts. Some users may also prefer silent observation over public engagement, particularly on themes where openly expressing views is deemed risky.

Figure (4): Social Media Use for Engagement in Public Debates on Political and Social Issues
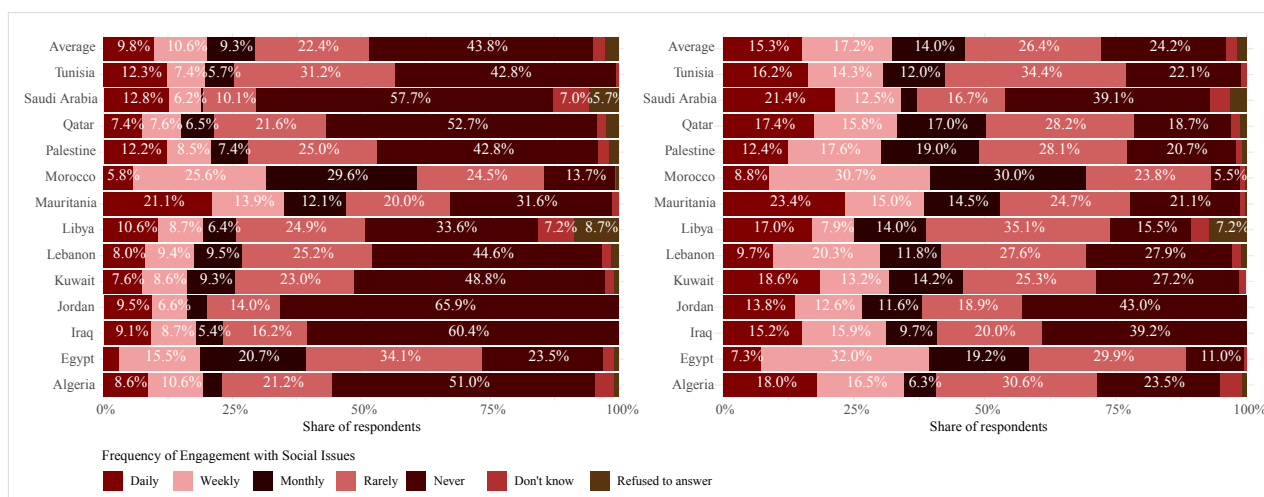
Surprisingly, the highest levels of very frequent engagement with political issues on social media are found among the oldest age group in the survey (65+), while the lowest are observed among the three youngest age groups (18-49), as shown in Figure 5. Daily use among those aged 65 and above for this purpose is more than twice that of respondents aged 25-34. This suggests that older social media users may be more politically active online, whereas younger users are more likely to use these platforms for social interaction and connecting with friends and acquaintances, rather than for political engagement. However, this generational gap disappears when it comes to engagement with issues the participants considered "social". In fact, younger age groups were slightly more likely to engage regularly with such content. This could indicate that younger users perceive social issues as more immediately relevant or actionable, while the discussion of political topics, especially in authoritarian contexts, may feel more futile.

Figure (5): Engagement with Political and Social Issues on Social Media Across Age Groups [3]
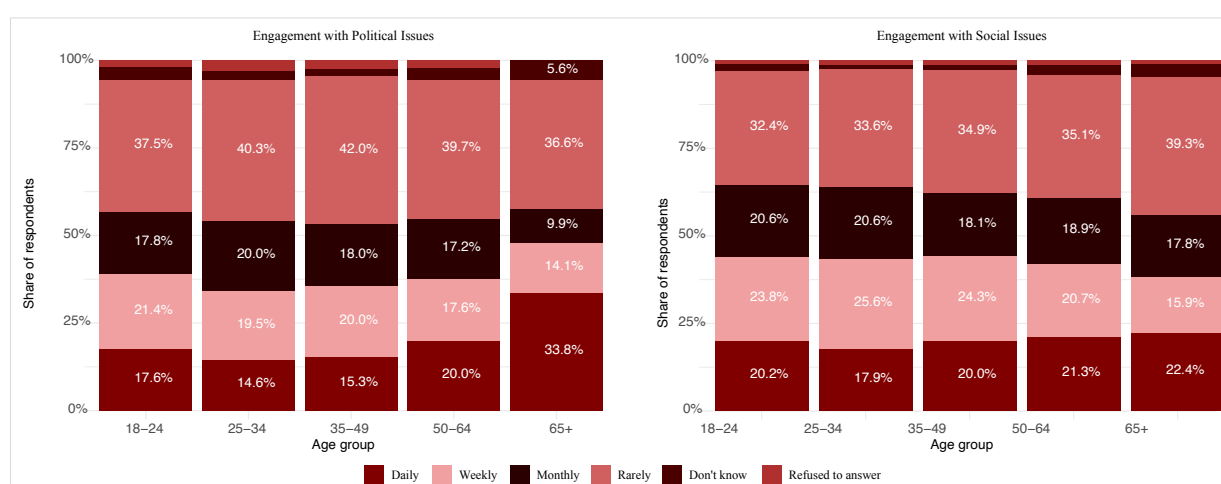
Social media platforms add a new dimension to people's engagement with political news, namely their ability to share rather than simply reach or consume content. However, survey data indicate that most people engage with social media in a predominantly passive manner, primarily for obtaining information, rather than expressing opinions. On average, two-thirds of the population across the countries surveyed reported that they never or only rarely used social media to express political opinions. In some countries, such as Jordan, this figure was even higher, with three-quarters of the population reporting lack of use for this purpose. There were notable exceptions: 68% in Morocco and 45% in Egypt reported using social media regularly (at least several times a month) to share their political views.

When asked specifically about engagement with Israel's war on Gaza, which has stirred widespread regional attention, only about 9% on average said they actively posted content, while the majority (58%) said they only followed news related to the war on social media without any form of active engagement. While political repression and perceived risks can partially explain these figures, it is important to note that similar response rates were reported regarding the expression of opinions on social media about any issue, political or otherwise.

However, the fact that only a minority use social media for active engagement in political or public debates does not necessarily indicate low engagement overall. These figures must be understood in relation to levels of engagement prior to the advent of social media, when such opportunities were far more limited. In this sense, while the proportion remains a minority, it is likely greater than it was before social media platforms. Future research needs to explore not only the extent, but also the nature of these engagements, to understand how political expression is navigated under authoritarian constraints.

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[3] Only percentages over 5% displayed on the stacks.

Attitudes Toward Social Media's Role in Society

Continuing the trend from 2022, the majority of Arab citizens maintain a generally positive outlook on the role of social media in society (Figure 6). In the most recent survey, 55.6% of respondents vieed social media as having a positive impact, while a significant minority of 39.3% thought it played a negative role. Sudan stands out as the most optimistic, with 77% of respondents perceiving social media's impact as positive. When compared to 2022, there is a notable decline in overall positive sentiment, which stood at 66% that year. This drop of optimism has been particularly pronounced in countries like Egypt, where positive views fell sharply from 81% in 2022 to just 47.2% in 2024-2025, a 34-point decrease. Similar declines were observed in Kuwait and Iraq, with each registering a 23-point drop (from 78% to 54.6% in Kuwait, and from 70% to 46.4% in Iraq). Similar trends persist from the previous year, with populations across North Africa displaying more tempered views on social media's role compared to the Levant, where people remain more optimistic.[4]

Figure (6): Evaluation of Social Media's Role in Society
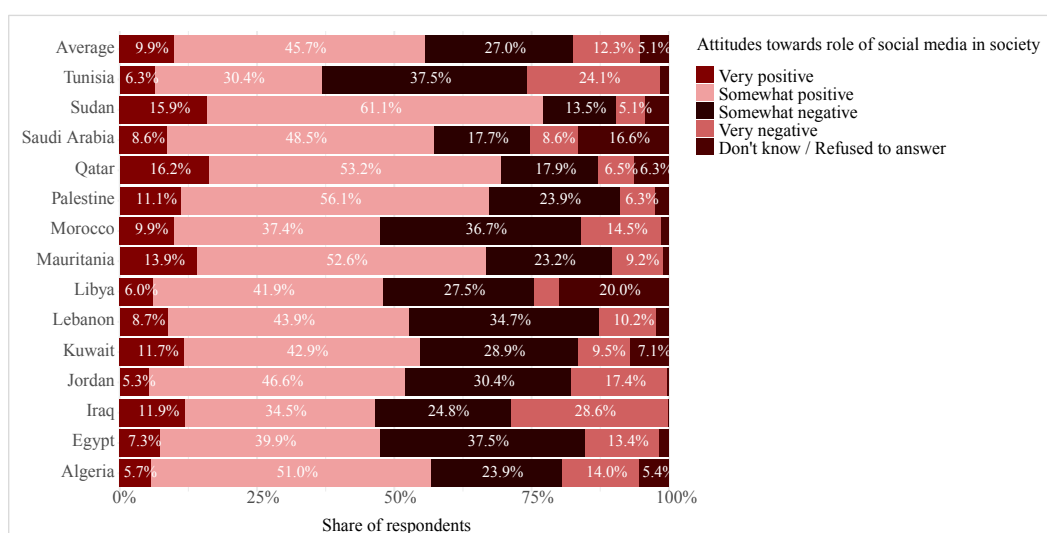
The trust index for social media content has remained relatively consistent across survey waves, averaging around 40 on a 100-point scale, though certain countries have exhibited significant decreases (Figure 7). Kuwait and Egypt saw a 15- and 10-point drop from 2022 and 2020, respectively. By contrast, the index of trust for Saudi Arabia saw a slight increase, although it remains lower than the average index.

There are widespread concerns over the spread of false information on social media platforms. Across the region – with few exceptions, namely Morocco – over half the population believes that social media has become a hotbed for the spread of rumours and fake news (Figure 8). In Egypt, 89% of respondents believe this to be the case at least to some extent. Furthermore, when asked about the statement that "much of what is published on social media is false and has the potential to misguide people", an average 71.5% either agreed or strongly agreed, with the highest percentages observed in Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt. Interestingly, these countries are also among the most positive about social media's role in society. This suggests that, while many recognize the spread of false information, they may attribute it to content sources rather than the platforms themselves – or that the perceived benefits of social media outweigh concerns about misinformation.

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[4] Adel Maalel, "Social Media's Socio-Cultural Impacts: An Analysis of the 2022 Arab Opinion Index," *Al-Muntaqa*, vol. 8, no. 1 (January/February 2025), pp. 96-106.

Figure (7): Trust in News and Information on Social Media Platforms
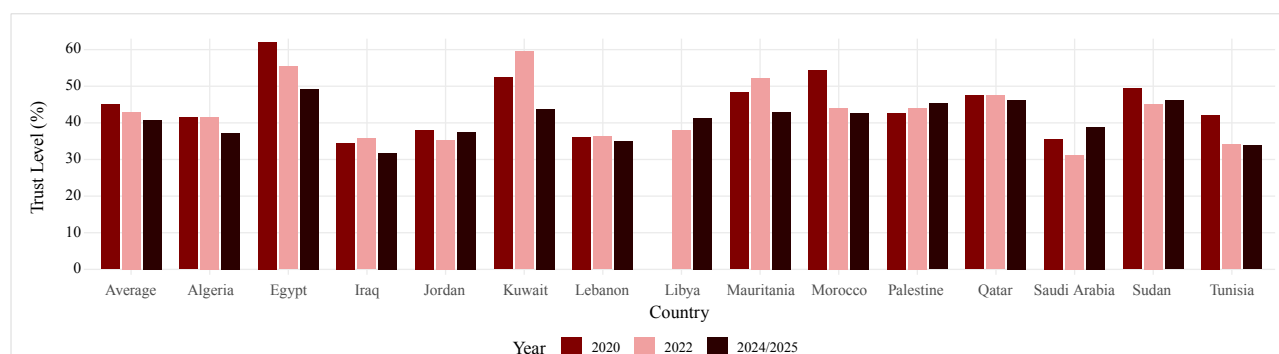
It should be noted that, compared to 2022, public perception of social media as a source of false or misleading content has slightly declined across most of the region. In 2022, 84% of respondents agreed that social media platforms have become spaces where fake news and rumours are spread, and only 13% disagreed. In 2024-2025, less people (74.4%) agreed with this statement. The most notable decreases were observed in Mauritania (from 84% to 60%) and Morocco (from 66% to 45%). In most other countries, the percentage of those who agreed remained relatively high, and in some cases, such as Sudan, it slightly increased (from 75% to 80%). The higher percentages of agreement observed in 2022 are likely attributable to the Covid-19 pandemic, which heightened public anxiety about social media's role in spreading fake news about the virus.

Concerns about fake news on social media are echoed in the general lack of total or very high reported levels of trust in social media content. However, one might expect that widespread agreement with the statement that "social media is a major source of fake news" would correspond to even lower levels of trust. Yet only a minority of respondents in most countries, including those where agreement with the "fake news" statement is highest, reported having little or no trust in the news and information circulating on social media. This contrast may point to a perceptual bias known as the third-person perception, which has been well documented in studies of fake-news beliefs on social platforms,[5] whereby people recognize that misinformation is rife on social media yet still trust the content they personally consume.

Figure (8): Spread of Rumours and Fake News on Social Media

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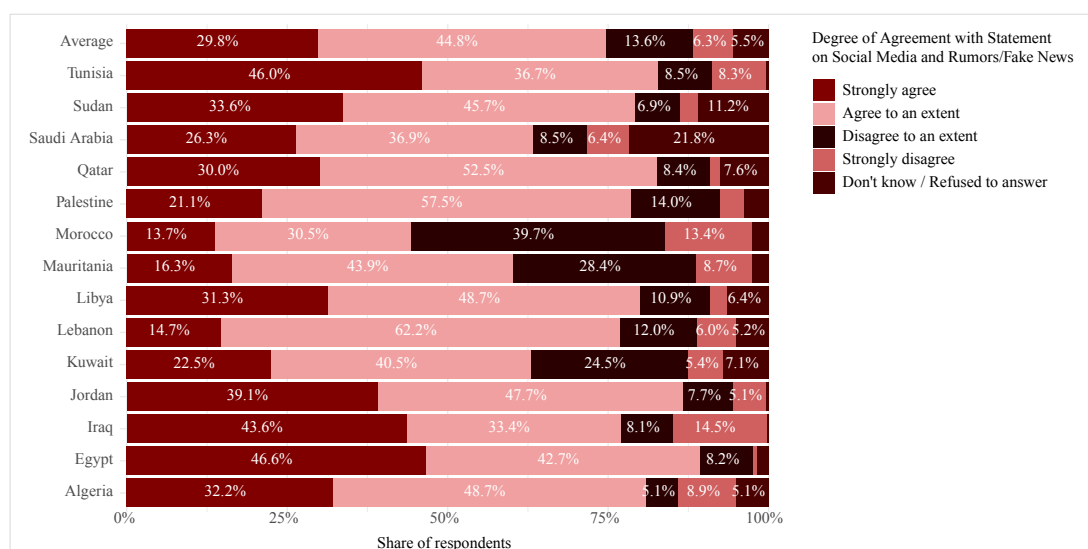
[5] Oana Ştefăniţă, Nicoleta Corbu & Raluca Buturoiu, "Fake News and the Third-Person Effect: They Are More Influenced than Me and You," *Journal of Media Research*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2018), pp. 5-23; Nicoleta Corbu et al., "'They Can't Fool Me, But They Can Fool the Others!' Third Person Effect and Fake News Detection," *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2020), pp. 165-180.

Across the countries surveyed, more respondents tended to agree with statements asserting both a negative and positive role of social media in society, reflecting a general acknowledgement of its multifaceted impact (Figure 9). Importantly, a majority of the population across the region expressed concern about the danger social media poses to local culture. Except for Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, and Morocco, over 50% of citizens in the countries surveyed agreed with the statement that "social media poses a threat because it introduces new customs that do not pertain to the local culture". It is noticeable that the agreement with this statement is highest in countries where concerns about the spread of fake news on social media are more pronounced. However, the statements with the highest levels of agreement across the region relate to the dangers social media poses to children and teenagers. This is unsurprising, given the long history of "technology panics" focused on its impact on children and adolescents, who are often perceived as especially vulnerable to manipulation or external influence.[6]

Despite these concerns, the majority of the populations in Arab countries express a positive outlook on social media's ability to educate and inform people on particular issues. For instance, more respondents agreed that social media can raise awareness and facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and culture than those who believed it causes users to waste time on trivial matters.

Figure (9): Social Media's Role in Society
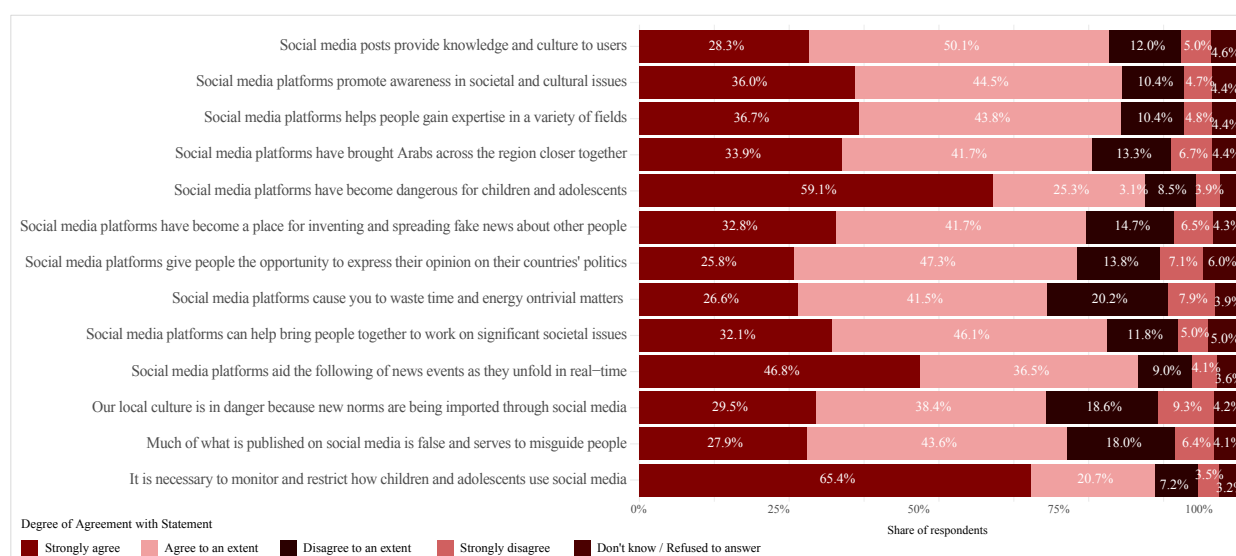
Perceptions and Attitudes on Censorship and Surveillance Activities

The 2025 AOI survey dedicated a set of questions to understanding the extent to which people in the region are aware of the surveillance, censorship, and control of information flows on social media, and their opinion on these practices. When asked whether they thought their activities on social media were being monitored by any party, a modest majority of respondents across the region, on average, believed there was little or no surveillance (Figure 10). However, there is significant inter-country variance regarding perceptions of surveillance. For instance, in Jordan, almost 60% felt there was at least some monitoring, with one-third feeling a high degree of surveillance, whereas 54% in Iraq said there was no surveillance at all. Similar contrasts emerged when respondents were asked about surveillance by specific parties, whether the state, companies, or the social media platforms themselves. In Iraq, at least 70% discounted the possibility of state monitoring, whereas in Jordan, the highest percentage (56%) amongst surveyed countries felt that the state was surveilling their content. On average, 38% of respondents reported perceiving surveillance from their government and state apparatus, at least to a moderate extent (Figure 11).

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6   Amy Orben, "The Sisyphean Cycle of Technology Panics," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 15, no. 5 (2020), pp. 1143-1157.

It is noteworthy that a non-negligible segment of the population either refused to answer or stated they did not know whether surveillance of content occurs. On average, 11.2% of respondents chose "I do not know" or declined to respond when asked about general surveillance perceptions. These rates were especially high in Saudi Arabia (32.1%), Sudan (22.8%), and Qatar (20%). High non-response rates to this question likely reflect genuine uncertainty or lack of knowledge about surveillance practices. When asked about specific actors, the highest levels of "I do not know" or "declined to respond" responses were recorded for foreign governments (13.7%), companies (11.9%), and domestic governments (11.3%).

A lack of awareness regarding surveillance might also explain why a majority, even in authoritarian contexts, say that they feel more rather than less free when expressing their opinions on social media. For instance, the average rating (out of 10) of one's freedom in Egypt was 7.3. The lowest rating was in Palestine, where the average was 4.6, indicating that more people had rated their freedom as below 5. Nevertheless, when asked whom they feared most when expressing their views online, the government was the most cited source of fear in most countries. However, in some contexts, people were more likely to cite fear of family, as in Iraq, or the possibility of account deactivation, as in Kuwait. These findings need to be considered in relation to the questions on the extent of political expression on social media, where a minority reported using these platforms for such purposes.

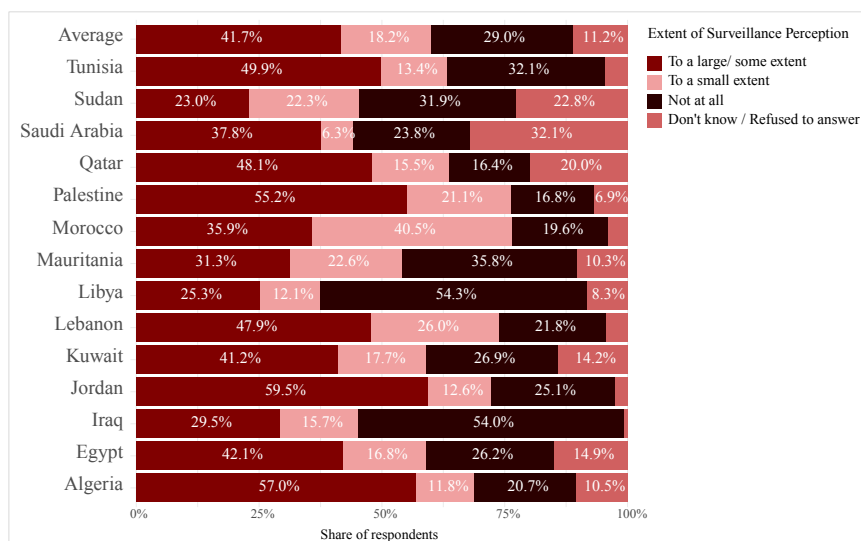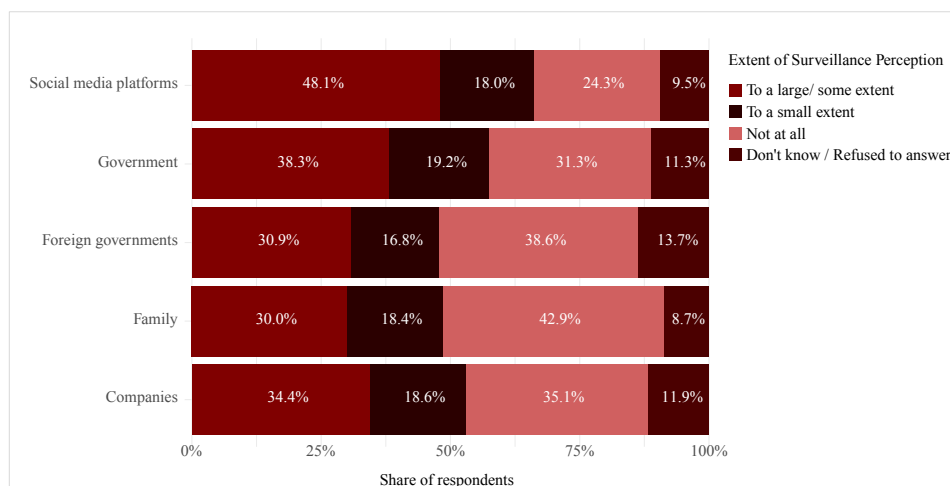**Figure (10): Perception of Surveillance Activities**

Figure (11): Perception of Surveillance by Different Parties

Among all the entities respondents were asked about, social media platforms were the most commonly recognized as engaging in surveillance activities (Figure 12). In some countries, up to a third of respondents believed these platforms conduct a high degree of monitoring. However, in Iraq, Mauritania, and Morocco, more than half the respondents thought there was very little or no surveillance by social media platforms, compared to those who thought there was at least some monitoring. Additionally, only a small minority (10% on average) across all the countries surveyed considered the possibility that certain content on social media was not reaching them or their audiences. This suggests that even as people may be aware of the surveillance activities of social media platforms, few reflect on how these platforms shape information flows and content control. The lack of awareness around this signals that discussions which became especially prominent during the war on Gaza, on how social media platforms censor and/or limit the reach of content that touches on particular themes, remains mainly confined to media-literate and politically engaged circles.

This limited awareness can partly be attributed to confirmation bias, a cognitive tendency to seek, interpret, and recall information in ways that affirm one's preexisting beliefs. In practice, users who already support the Palestinian cause and frequently engage with Gaza-related content are more likely to encounter similar material in their feeds. This reinforcement creates the perception that relevant content is widely accessible, even when it may not be. As users continue to see what they expect, they are less likely to recognize when other perspectives or critical content are being suppressed. This effect is amplified by algorithmic echo chambers, which work hand in hand with confirmation bias by clustering users with other like-minded individuals and filtering out opposing views. These dynamics reinforce dominant narratives not only by hiding alternative perspectives,[7] but also rendering the effect of content suppression less visible. Filter bubbles and the personalized content ecosystems shaped by users' past behaviour,[8] isolate individuals in "ideologically safe" environments, making it difficult to perceive the extent of existing censorship.

Nevertheless, when respondents were asked specifically which platforms they thought were limiting the flow of information related to the Palestinian cause, as many as 40% in countries like Jordan and Mauritania identified Facebook. However, very few, only 1% in Sudan and 3% in Egypt, considered the possibility that Instagram, another platform owned by Meta, also restricted content. Further research should consider the extent to which perceptions of censorship are based on first-hand experience and how the existing debate on censorship activities of social media platforms shapes their perceptions.

**Figure (12): Perception of Surveillance by Social Media Platforms**

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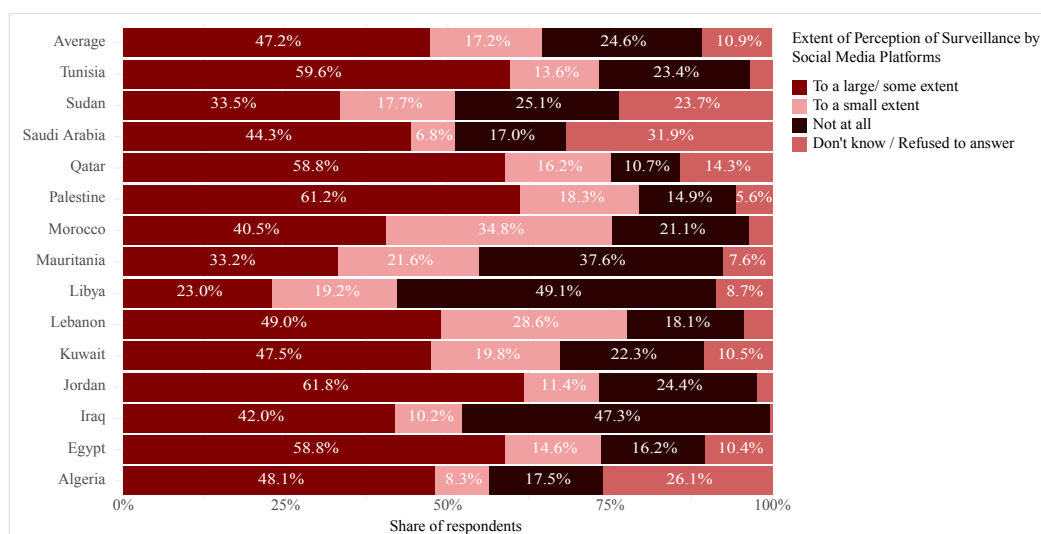
7 Cass R. Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2002), pp. 175-195; Matteo Cinelli et al., "The echo chamber effect on social media," *PNAS*, vol. 118, no. 9 (2021), pp. 1-8.

8 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin Press, 2011).

Survey results across the Arab region reveal that public awareness of "electronic armies" or bots remains limited, with some variation across countries and types of actors involved (Figure 13). On average, only 15-16% of respondents reported being aware of bots affiliated with foreign governments, foreign entities, political groups within their country, or their own governments. Awareness was slightly lower for private companies (13%). The vast majority consistently answered "no" to all categories. Among the countries surveyed, Lebanon exhibited the highest degrees of perception, with 26-29% of respondents indicating awareness of bots linked to various parties. Other countries with higher-than-average awareness were Iraq, Egypt, and Palestine. On the other hand, Qatar consistently showed the lowest levels of awareness, with only 2-7% of respondents reporting knowledge of bots. Similarly, Jordan and Kuwait showed low awareness.

While the use of bots and digital propaganda is widespread and well-documented in the region,[9] public acknowledgement remains very limited. However, the relatively high percentage of people denying knowledge of bot activity across all countries does not necessarily signal the absence of such activity. Instead, these responses may reflect a combination of limited media literacy, self-censorship, and fear of surveillance.

Figure (13): Public Awareness of Bot Armies in Relation to Their Attributed Affiliation
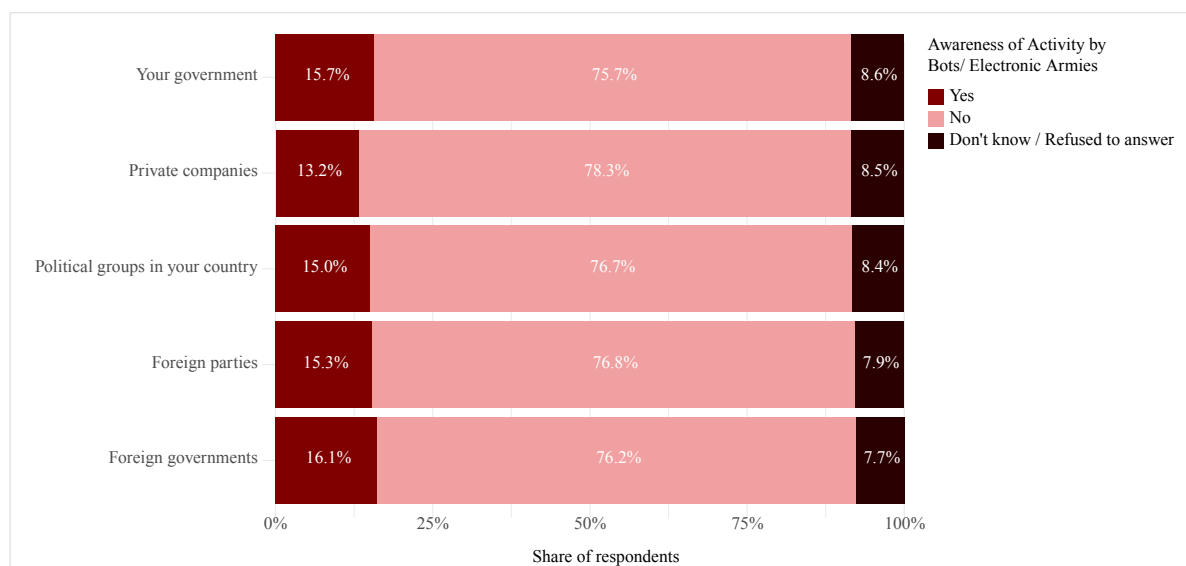
Responses reveal that people have generally favourable attitudes toward government censorship and control of social media content. When asked about their view of government restrictions of access to control of social media content, more people, on average, agreed with such measures than disagree. In Tunisia and Iraq, for example, 65% and 67% of respondents, respectively, supported government restrictions (Figure 14). With some exceptions, disagreement with both statements was generally lower than 10%. In Libya, 20% of respondents fell into this category. One possible interpretation could be the country's political fragmentation; with two competing governments, respondents may be reluctant to trust either authority to carry out censorship, even if they might otherwise support such measures under a unified or more legitimate government.

In some countries, an unusually high percentage of respondents reported that they did not know or refused to answer questions about government restrictions on content. In Saudi Arabia, a notable 40.4%

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9 Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard, *Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation*, The computational propaganda project (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2018), pp.1-26; Marc Owen Jones, "The Gulf Information War| Propaganda, Fake News, and Fake Trends: The Weaponization of Twitter Bots in the Gulf Crisis," *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 13 (2019), p. 27; Mona Elswah & Philip N. Howard, *The Challenges of Monitoring Social Media in the Arab World: The Case of the 2019 Tunisian Elections*, The Computational Propaganda Project (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2020), p. 2.

of respondents said they did not know or refused to answer whether they agreed with their government-imposed content restriction. While Saudi respondents tended to score high on "I do not know/refused" responses throughout the survey, this was the only instance where the percentage surpassed 40%, making it particularly noteworthy. This pattern could reflect several underlying factors: refusal to answer may suggest fear of openly sharing views on politically sensitive topics, while saying "I do not know" might indicate uncertainty or reluctance to take a stance. These potential explanations need further consideration, especially given the country's political and media contexts.

When respondents were asked whether they trusted their government to censor social media content deemed to have a negative influence on society, a majority across the region expressed at least some level of trust. High trust in the government on this issue was reported by more than 40% of the population in Qatar, Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait. Taken together, responses to both questions on attitudes toward government restriction of content and on trust in government to conduct censorship, indicate that a majority of people in the region support government control over social media content.

Figure (14): Opinion on Whether the Government Should Restrict Access to Content
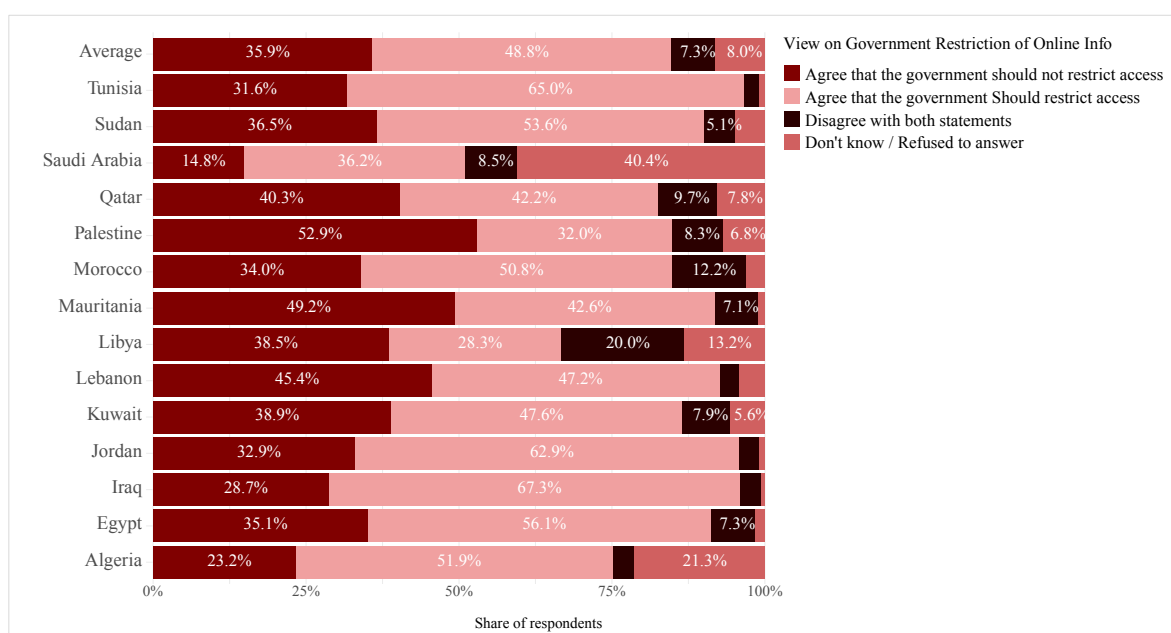
The type of content that respondents most frequently supported for government censorship is that deemed offensive to religious values, followed by content considered dangerous to children and teenagers, as well as that inciting violence and racism (Figure 15). The most divisive content regarding government censorship was content critical of government politics, which received the lowest level of support compared to other content categories. In some countries, public opinion was split over whether content critical of societal values should be censored by the government, but on average, a significant majority (74%) supported such measures. Moroccans were the least likely to support government censorship of any content, whereas Jordanians were the most likely to strongly support it, with approval peaking at 82% in the latter country for censoring content offensive to religious values and material dangerous to children and teenagers. With the exception of Morocco, which was more equally divided, at least 80% across all countries surveyed supported at least to an extent (a majority of whom supported to a large degree) government censorship of content deemed offensive to religious values, while at least 70% supported censorship of content critical of their society's values. These results point to overwhelmingly conservative views in the region regarding the creation and sharing of content that is critical of societal and religious values. Further research is

needed to understand how people reconcile their support for government censorship on such potentially sensitive topics with their demands for increased freedom of speech and democracy. Integrating questions on government censorship of social media content into studies of popular political culture can provide valuable indicators to shed light on the specific vision of democracy that people advocate.

Figure (15): Attitudes Toward Government Censorship of Content Categories
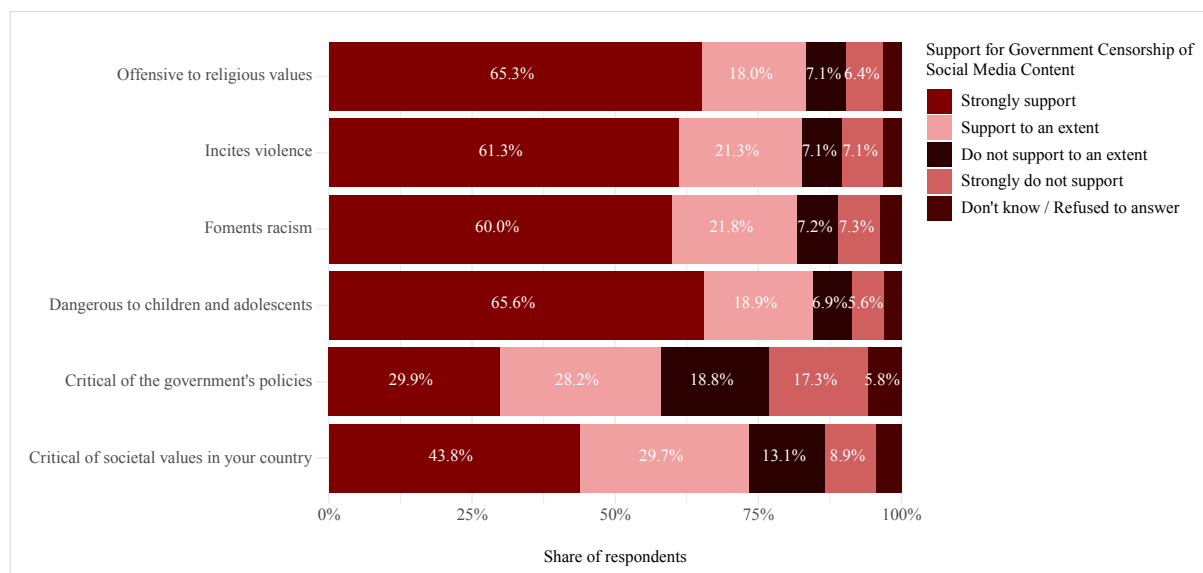
Conclusion

This report has examined patterns of social media use across 14 Arab countries, focusing on public attitudes toward digital platforms, as well as perceptions of misinformation, surveillance, and political engagement. The findings suggest a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between users and social media: while these platforms are widely used as sources of information and spaces for discussion, concerns about their societal impact remain strong.

While most people in the region hold generally optimistic views about the role of social media in their societies, they also expressed concerns over the negative influence on younger generations and the threat it poses to local culture. An overwhelming majority in most surveyed countries support government censorship of content they consider as inflicting such harm, reflecting the generally conservative views toward freedom of speech on social media. Despite this support for censorship, a significant proportion of the population continues to use social media for public discussions of political and social issues, as well as for accessing news. Thus, more qualitative research is needed to understand the kind of censorship that people are requesting, and more analytical work is required to examine the factors that drive support for censorship, particularly on potentially socially contentious themes, such as religiosity, support for democracy, and liberal values.

Receiving news and political information ranks among the most popular reasons for social media use in the region. Large proportions of the surveyed populations report using social media for news about the wars in Palestine, Lebanon, and Sudan. Political engagement on the platforms tends to be more passive, with users more likely to consume rather than produce content. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of the population actively engages with political information and in discourses about social issues. Further research is needed to determine which topics elicit higher levels of engagement and how such engagement shapes public perceptions on these themes, particularly in authoritarian contexts, where many respondents report not fearing expression on social media.

Much scholarship has explored how social media has changed the landscape for public debate through its particular affordances, designed to serve a market logic, that have the power to change the meaning of participation or deliberation, increase polarization, and lock people in echo chambers. This research needs to be extended to the region and elaborated with respect to non-democratic contexts, where it appears that there is significant use of social media for debate on publicly relevant topics.

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BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS
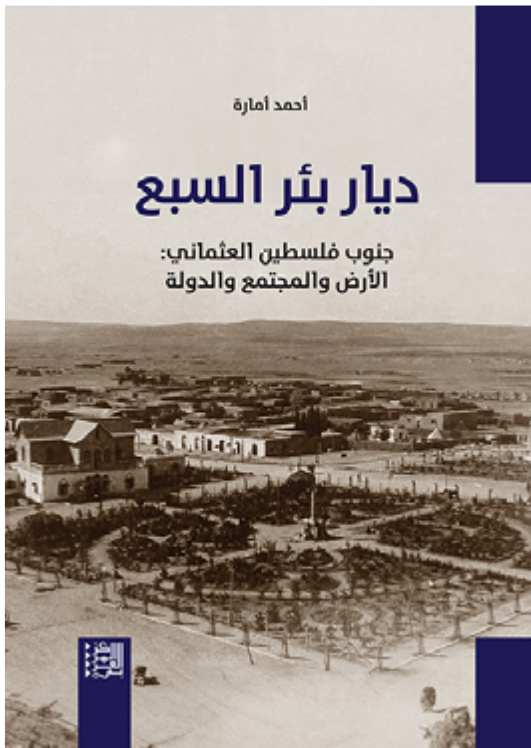
Ahmad Amara, *Diyār Biʾr al-Sabaʿ, Janūb Filasṭīn al-ʿUthmānī: al-Arḍ wa-l-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Dawla* [*Beersheba Region, Southern Ottoman Palestine: Land, Society, and State*] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024), pp. 344.

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Although the history of the people of southern Palestine constitutes an essential part of the region's broader history, and despite that the south comprises more than half of historic Palestine,[1] it has received scant attention in the historiography on Palestine, amounting to an "epistemological catastrophe". This neglect spans the Ottoman era, through the British Mandate, under Israeli military rule, and up to the May 2021 uprising (*Habbat Ayyār*). With the exception of works such Ghazi Falah's 1989 *The Forgotten Palestinians*,[2] and Aref al-Aref's writings on Bir al-Sabaʿ and its people,[3] available studies on southern Palestine, especially of Bir al-Sabaʿ (Beersheba) and its surroundings, often exhibit a notable lack of in-depth, critical analysis, and limited use of documents and oral narratives that capture the experiences of the people of the land, who have remained steadfast in their homeland despite ongoing catastrophes.

Recent studies[4] have changed that trend, most notably Ahmed Amara's book *Beersheba Region, Southern Ottoman Palestine: Land, Society, and State*.[5] Amara's work poses a number of important questions: Where does the Palestinian south (the Naqab) stand in studies of Palestine, and why was it ignored for decades? Why have studies by English and French travellers, Israeli sociologists, Orientalists, and others focused particularly on southern Palestine?[6] What are the roots of the ongoing conflict over land ownership in southern Palestine within the colonial court system? These questions remain relevant to researchers today. For example, Birzeit University Museum held a dialogue titled "Narratives of Southern Palestine: Imperial Frontiers", which addressed similar concerns, most notably: Have Palestinian studies fallen into the colonial trap regarding southern Palestine?[7] Moreover, in 2010, the first international conference on the Bir al-Sabaʿ and Naqab district was held at the University of Exeter in the UK, followed by another academic conference at Columbia University in New York.[8] These two conferences, among others, generated

1 Salman Abu Sittah, "al-Niṣf al-Mansī min Filasṭīn: Qaḍāʾ Biʾr al-Sabaʿ wa-l-Nakba al-Mustamirra," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, no. 73 (Winter 2008), pp. 37-50; Mansour Nasasra, "Qaḍāʾ Biʾr al-Sabaʿ wa-l-Janūb al-Filasṭīnī: Ḥikāyat ʿUqūd min al-Niḍāl wa-l-Ṣumūd," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, no. 140 (Autumn 2024), pp. 44-62.

2 Ghazi Fallah, *al-Filasṭīniyyūn al-Mansiyyūn: ʿArab al-Naqab 1906-1986* (Taybah: Markaz al-Turath al-Arabi, 1989).

3 Aref al-Aref, *Tārīkh Biʾr al-Sabaʿ wa-Qabāʾilihā* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbouli, 1999).

4 These include: Mansour Nasasra, *The Naqab Bedouins: A Century of Politics and Resistance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Alexandre Kedar, Ahmad Amara & Oren Yiftachel, *Emptied Lands: A Legal Geography of Bedouin Rights in the Negev* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

5 Ahmad Amara, *Diyār Biʾr al-Sabaʿ, Janūb Filasṭīn al-ʿUthmānī: al-Arḍ wa-l-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Dawla* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024).

6 Ibid., p. 6.

7 "Riwāyāt Janūb Filasṭīn: Tukhūm Imbiryāliyya," *Birzeit University Museum*, 13/3/2025, accessed on 17/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/48m3wfwd

8 "Representations of 'Indigeneity' in Settler-Colonial Contexts: The Case of the Naqab Bedouin," Center for Palestine Studies, Columbia University, accessed on 13/3/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/mr3nhuku

serious academic discussions on the land and people of the Naqab, land ownership, and how the region is conceptualized within both Palestinian discourse and the Israeli settler colonial project.[9] These discussions sparked a fascinating debate about the absence of the Naqab from Palestine studies and from broader discourse on settler colonialism.[10]

Southern Palestine was known as *Bilād Ghazza* (the land of Gaza) up to the 19th century and was directly administered by the Mutasarrif of Jerusalem. In 1900, however, the Ottoman authorities administratively separated the city of Bir al-Sabaʿ and its surroundings from the Gaza district. The latter had included 62 Palestinian villages, along with numerous Bedouin tribes.[11] Yet this administrative and geographical separation existed only on paper, as the Gaza district contained many Bedouin clans, and historical ties continued to link the villages of the two districts on economic, social, and political levels. This close relationship between the Bedouins of the south and their region's capital is reflected in the use of the term "*Sabʿawiyya*", referring not only to residents of the city but also to those living throughout the district. The Bir al-Sabaʿ district discussed in Amara's book is that defined by Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh, spanning an area of approximately 12,577,000 dunams,[12] extending from the village of al-Faluja in the north to Gaza in the west, Hebron in the east, and as far south as Umm al-Rashrash on the Gulf of Aqaba.

In the first chapter of the book, the author critically examines the various names assigned to the region under study. It has been referred to as the Naqab, Bir al-Sabaʿ/Beersheba, and simply "southern Palestine", as well as "*Diyār Biʾr al-Sabaʿ*", which is the title of Amara's book in Arabic. The region's inhabitants are known as the "Bedouins of the Naqab" or the "Arabs (*ʿUrbān*) of Bir al-Sabaʿ".

The book uses the word *dīyār* in its title, meaning "homeland, *bilād* or *waṭan*" in the southern Palestinian dialect of the Bedouin Sabʿawis. It is part of an origin narrative that extends back to ancient times, as the use of *Biʾr al-Sabaʿ*, the historical Palestinian name for the region, dates to the Islamic era, as stated in the medieval scholar Yaqut al-Hamawi's *Muʿjam al-Buldān* (Dictionary of Countries).[13]

Amara's book avoids using the term *Naqab*, a name that residents only began to use in recent decades. The author critiques this usage, arguing that this overwhelming use of the term "Negev" is not coincidental. As in other regions, the Zionist movement transformed the Negev from an ideological region referred to in the Bible (from Dan to Beersheva) into a specific geographical area and a much broader national territory. The Zionist movement revived this ancient term in the 1930s, while simultaneously redefining it geographically to encompass an area larger than it did from a doctrinal point of view.[14]

The second chapter of the book focuses on the prosperity of the southern region due to its agriculture, highlighting the fertility of the lands of the Bir al-Sabaʿ district and their production of the finest-grade wheat and barley in Palestine, which were widely traded in local markets and exported globally. This chapter demonstrates the locals' connection to their land and their ongoing cultivation of it to this day.

The author demonstrates the historical reality, also documented in the British archives, of the flourishing cultivation of wheat and barley in the district. The British archives mention vast areas of land around

[9] The conferences resulted in a book and several studies, notably: Mansour Nasasra et al. (eds.), *The Naqab Bedouin and Colonialism: New Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2014); Sophie Richter-Devroe, Mansour Nasasra & Richard Ratcliffe, "The Politics of Representation: The Case of the Naqab Bedouin," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1-6.

[10] Bruce Stanley, "Review Article: The Settler-Colonial Paradigm and Naqab Bedouin Studies," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2016), pp. 129-134.

[11] Theodore Edward Downing, *Gaza: A City of Many Battles (from the Family of Noah to the Present Day)* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1913).

[12] Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh, *Mawsūʿat Bilāduna Filasṭīn*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar Al-Taliʿa, 1965), pp. 325-327.

[13] Shihab al-Din Abu Abdullah Yaqut bin Abdullah al-Rumi al-Hamawi, *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1995).

[14] Amara, pp. 69-70.

the village of al-Khalasa planted with wheat, describing the Bedouins as "skilled in agriculture" and continuously cultivating their lands. They also refer to the presence of wheat mills (*bābūr*) in several villages of the district, including Tal al-Milh, 'Ara'ra, and the city of Bir al-Saba' itself.[15]

The third chapter of the book analyses tribal justice in southern Palestine and the means used by tribesmen to resolve disputes, known in Bedouin custom as *ṣulḥa*. In a recent interview in the Jordanian city of Ma'an, Muhammad al-Jazi told me that "the origin of tribal justice in our region goes back to Bir al-Saba'", from where it spread to the tribes of eastern Jordan, Ma'an, and Sinai.[16] Amara supports this, pointing out that the *'Urbān* often governed themselves according to the laws and social norms known as "customary laws" or *'urf*,[17] a system that also included resolving land disputes, demarcating land boundaries, and the tribal recognition of those boundaries through instruments known as *sanad* or *kūshān*. The book also addresses issues of blood feuds and personal status.

The fourth chapter focuses on the founding of the city of Bir al-Saba', explaining that "the city of Bir al-Saba' possesses a rare social mosaic",[18] comprising Jerusalemites, Gazans, Sab'awis, and even residents of Jaffa, Bethlehem, and Hebron. This, in fact contradicts the author's own claim – citing the Hebrew newspaper *Hapoel Hatzair* – that most residents of the city during the Ottoman period were from Gaza or Hebron.[19] Ottoman documents further reveal that many of the homes in Bir al-Saba' were owned by members of Bedouin families of the city and its hinterlands.[20] Regarding land ownership during the British period,[21] it is worth adding that residents of Gaza and Hebron also owned land on the outskirts of Bir al-Saba'.

The fifth chapter explains how Israel used the legal systems of both the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate to serve its interests.[22] In doing so, Amara presents the historical injustices inflicted on the people of Bir al-Saba', including the theft of their lands and the denial of their historical rights.

The sixth chapter discusses issues that remain major points of contention today, notably property disputes and the tensions between customary and state laws. While Ottoman and British maps indicate that the majority of the land in southern Palestine was owned by the indigenous tribesmen, which was recognized by Britain when Winston Churchill visited Bir al-Saba' in 1921, the district operated under a tribal system that clearly recognized land boundaries between various tribes. These boundaries, as depicted on British colonial maps, are no longer considered sufficient for the Israeli legal system to recognize ownership of disputed lands.[23] The chapter also delves into the issue of land rights in Bir al-Saba' under Ottoman administrative reforms.[24]

Finally, the seventh chapter addresses the Israeli colonial system's strategies for dispossessing the people of the Naqab of their lands. Israel exploited Ottoman land laws and military rule as tools to confiscate the land in the Naqab,[25] invoking laws such as the Absentee Property Law. The author also writes that Israel devised the "dead Naqab doctrine" as a way of asserting absolute control over the lands of the Naqab's

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15 Mansour Nasasra & Bruce Stanley, "Assembling Urban Worlds: Always–Becoming Urban in and Through Bir al-Saba," *Urban History*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2024).

16 Muhammad al-Jazi, Professor of Modern History at Hussein Bin Talal University, Personal Interview, Maan, Jordan, 2024.

17 Amara, p. 120.

18 Ibid., p. 150.

19 Ibid., p. 135.

20 "Köylerin Konum Tespitleri: Filistin Mülkiyet Projesi," Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif Universitesi, accessed on 13/3/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/56teshme

21 Amara, p. 159.

22 Ibid., p. 302.

23 Kedar, Amara & Yiftachel.

24 Amara, p. 228.

25 Ibid., p. 303.

inhabitants.[26] As a result, the majority of the Bedouins of southern Palestine were displaced to Gaza and Jordan, and the city of Bir al-Saba' was emptied after the Nakba.

The author would have done well to clarify the social relations between Bir al-Saba' and Gaza, beyond their commercial ties.[27] The people of Bir al-Saba' also owned homes and land in Gaza, and some local tribes trace their origins to the city. These connections fostered social relations and even intermarriages between the two regions, which explains why a large number of people from Bir al-Saba' were displaced to Gaza refugee camps on the eve of the Nakba. Furthermore, the author could have explored in greater depth Bir al-Saba''s relationship with the city of Ma'an in the southern Jordanian desert, given the city's connectedness to markets in Ma'an and Gaza and to the pilgrimage routes. A map of Bir al-Saba', with street names and an outline of property ownership, would also have been a valuable addition.

To conclude, I must emphasize Amara's words in his conclusion: "This is a clear call for an alternative approach, one that views the Bedouin tribes as part of the Palestinian social fabric and rejects the isolation of the Bedouins, imposed by Orientalism and foreign travellers".[28] This resonates with the lyrics of a popular Bedouin song, articulating a refutation of the colonial narrative that excludes the Palestinian south from the broader Palestinian narrative and struggle. As the Bedouin women of Bir al-Saba' sang at their weddings:

I forbid myself to wear the scarf of pride / for those who were killed as martyrs in Gaza;

I forbid myself to wear *koḥl* on my eyes / for those who were killed in Wadi Hanin.

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[26] Sulayman Abu Arshid, "D. Aḥmad ʾAmāra: ʿAqīdat al-Naqab al-Mayyit li-l-Sayṭara ʿalā al-Arḍ," *Arab48*, 14/7/2025, accessed on 13/3/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/mpvzh8ns

[27] Amara, p. 99.

[28] Ibid., p. 316.

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Ahmed Zeineldin, *al-Mawt Bayn al-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Thaqāfa* [*Death Between Society and Culture*] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024), pp. 223.

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Research on death emerged early in Europe, particularly within the framework of the history of mentalities. In contrast, Arabic scholarship on the subject remains limited. Among the most notable recent contributions is *Death Between Society and Culture*[1] by Ahmed Zeineldin. The first section of the book explores people's aversion to the subject of death, which is framed as a perplexing enigma. Zeineldin demonstrates that this reluctance reflects the early institutionalization of religion and the emergence of the rational man, marked by entrenched ceremonial practices, which shaped premodern rituals of social organization.[2] The author emphasizes the importance of circumstances and modes of engagement with mourning and burial rituals, and contends that death can only be logically interpreted through the imagination – "the aptitude that produces religion and mythology".[3]

In the book's second section, Zeineldin discusses "deceased intermediaries", which analyses the formation of the imaginary of death, whose forms and symbols have retained their continuity. He describes the phenomenon of righteous saints (*al-Awliyāʾ al-Ṣāliḥīn*), outlining its historical evolution and arguing that it is particularly characteristic of the Maghreb, where "[the saints'] prestige and sanctity take shape while they are alive, or shortly after they die".[4] He next examines Iraqi Ashura rituals, which he concludes that they possess a distinctively bloody character.

In the book's final section, Zeineldin examines what he terms "sacrificial death". He addresses the question of immortality through death, focusing on martyrdom (i.e. suicide operations) by the Romans and early Christians, and later by Muslims. The book concludes that death encompasses a wide array of meanings and that, despite humanity's advancements in science and philosophy, the reproduction of the dead remains a part of our social world via the collective imaginary.

Zeineldin approaches death as a universal social phenomenon that intersects with science, culture, religion, aesthetics, and economics. He draws on anthropological tools to offer a condensed overview of key scholarly works on representations of death through deceased intermediaries and sacrificial death in mythological, Islamic, Christian, and Greek heritage. His comparison operates on three levels: represented death, death via deceased intermediaries, and sacrificial death. Through this comparison, Zeineldin underscores the centrality of the "imagined encounter", as if death leads only to the symbolic.

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[1] Ahmed Zeineldin, *al-Mawt Bayn al-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Thaqāfa* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024).
[2] Ibid., p. 15.
[3] Ibid., p. 14.
[4] Ibid., p. 114.

Zeineldin studies death within society and culture, drawing on the most important ideas that imbue death with meaning (including people's attitudes to and conceptions of death) based on parables, religion, and folk culture. He offers a nuanced comparison between the Mashreq and the Maghreb, examining their conceptions of death, rituals, and ritual dramatization of the entire funerary process: from the moment of passing away, to the integration of the deceased into the afterlife, and finally to the reassimilation of the living into the worldly realm.

The author defines the meanings of death as complex, obscured, and terrifying to the living. He underscores the importance of rituals in providing reassurance against the cruelty and absurdity of death. The inescapable certainty of death, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding its timing, manner, and aftermath, creates dynamics of symbolic interaction with this invisible occurrence.

Zeineldin treats death not as a biological fact, but as a sociological one. He argues that once funerals are theatricalized, death is humanized, gaining what he calls "universal social dimensions", encompassing the symbolic, aesthetic, cultural, religious, and everyday aspects of social life. Moreover, death intersects with authority because it transforms into a process of investment *par excellence* within "political conflict and tangible economic advantages".[5]

The author infers that religion originates in coming to terms with death. This explains why grave visits and traditional funerary rituals have endured despite social changes that have, to some extent, disrupted the bonds between death and the deceased. Furthermore, death is increasingly experienced as an individual rather than a collective event today. People interact with death in isolation from their families, particularly in private clinics, where informing families and coordinating the removal of the body require delicate handling and procedural clarity.

Zeineldin argues that laws have been enacted to regulate death-related practices, graveyards, and burials, just as modes of consolation and commemoration (such as obituaries in newspapers) have changed. Zeineldin also contends that economics in general extends beyond production to encompass a symbolic economy of death. This is evident in new social systems for managing death, such as life insurance, funerary goods, and burial costs. Moreover, death is closely tied to money through inheritance after death, which can serve as a means of social validation. Celebrations also "invest the sacred for deployment in the economic and social domains (such as vows, food, and exchange of animals)".[6]

Zeineldin also emphasizes that death is deeply intertwined with "issues of society and human development; it is an intricate field of study within the history of mentalities, as it is approached in Western universities. In recent decades, the study of death (thanatology) has advanced to the point of inclusion in the curricula of many foreign institutions".[7]

The author concludes by concurring with Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), that all cultures are "ingenious instruments for concealing, or beautifying, the face of death such that it becomes tolerable to look at or coexist with. Whether death comes in an abbreviated, adjusted, or transmitted form, it cannot be banished entirely from human life. Perhaps the fundamental fear of death is the prototype of all other kinds of fear".[8]

While approaches to death lie beyond the scope of empiricism, Zeineldin examines it within the contexts that shape its representations and the way society interacts with its mysteries. He investigates

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[5] Ibid., p. 198.
[6] Ibid., p. 122.
[7] Ibid., p. 15.
[8] Ibid., p. 17.

a "taboo"[9] or "unthought" (French: *impensé*)[10] topic, understood as part of human behaviour. Adopting a phenomenological lens, Zeineldin understands death by describing the meanings of social reality and lived experience, thus lending his study a distinctly subjective dimension. However, this subjectivity also surfaces in his treatment of particularities of the Maghreb. Moreover, he overlooks some enduring rituals, such as the *arbaʿīn* (a commemoration observed 40 days after death), which is not practised across all Muslim societies.

The author discusses coping with death through an anthropological framework, situating death "within a particular social context subject to cultural perspectives constructed by educational and religious means, which vary between environments and according to the status and class of the deceased. Distinction is made between rich and poor, relative and stranger".[11] Zeineldin's decision to address a taboo subject through a qualitative, comprehension-based, Weberian approach is commendable in its boldness. But the book would have benefitted from integrating qualitative and quantitative data to more effectively illuminate how key variables relate, such as the ways in which Arabs die and whether death rates differ between men and women, or between urban and rural populations. In addition, while much qualitative research has been written on death as a concept, ritual, and belief, the author leaves unaddressed the potential for scientific progress to demystify death or to reconceptualize it as a form of life. He could have also explored further how death is now experienced and mediated through virtual reality.

After outlining the sociocultural aspects of death, Zeineldin turns to regional scholarly contributions "because of its close connection with the function of religious shrines of saints and righteous individuals, and the way this relates to political liberties".[12] However, he only briefly alludes to Radouan Rabhi's work[13] despite the accessibility of online material dealing with death, ranging from Quranic verses, the Prophet's Sunna, and juristic reasoning to folkloric sources. Furthermore, the author does not take full advantage of the opportunity to apply a hermeneutical lens to doctrinal inclination, particularly concerning the different types of death and the associated local customs.

Zeineldin touches on several important themes in passing – such as death's intersections with globalization, economics, authority, sexuality, childhood, and old age – without exploring them in depth. One notable omission is the digital mediation of death, with technology having become a locus of consolation and remembrance that may be termed "the Thanatos of the digital age" (*Thanatos à l'ère du numérique*).[14] This research area helps us understand whether or not digital platforms have changed our perceptions of death and the deceased. To that end, I would argue that they can indeed change perceptions and rituals concerning death, such as suicide, its theatricalization on social media, and digital tributes.

One of Zeineldin's most important contributions lies in his observation that the West has sought to push death out of the public sphere, "confining its outward manifestations to the shallow crucible of healthcare facilities, hospitals, or family homes. Meanwhile, major funerary rituals with theatrical dimensions have remained present in our societies".[15] However, this binary overlooks the extent to which European societies

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[9] Michel Vovelle, *L'heure du grande passage chronique de la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 103. Louis-Vincent Thomas echoes this view, writing that "death will become as sex was in the past: the primary taboo of the contemporary world". See Louis-Vincent Thomas, "Les sociétés devant la mort," in: *Encyclopaedie Universalis*, corpus 12 (Paris: Encyclopaedia universalis France, 1985), p. 668; Monica Charlot, *Vivre avec la mort* (Paris: Editions Alain Moreau, 1976), p. 211.

[10] The "unthought" is "no more than an accumulation of what is unthinkable [*impensable*] at several successive historical junctures, for reasons religious, political, social, or otherwise". See: Mohammed Arkoun, *Islamic Thought: A Scientific Reading*, Hashem Saleh (trans.) (Beirut: Centre de Development National, 1987), p. 18.

[11] Zeineldin, p. 22.

[12] Ibid., p. 16.

[13] Radouan Rabhi, "Horizons of the Historiography of Death in the Far Maghreb," *Anthropologia*, vol. 3 (March 2016), pp. 51-61.

[14] Didier Moulinier, *Eros et Thanatos à l'ère du numérique: Suivi de, Remarques sur le Virtuel* (Paris: Editions Les contemporains Favoris, 2015).

[15] Zeineldin, p. 23.

also theatricalize death rituals, particularly on occasions such as All Souls' Day (2 November) or in the commemoration of the victims of terrorist attacks. These societies employ the theatricalization of death as a vital means of reassuring the living. They maintain symbolic interaction with the deceased as a strategy for coping with loss – as a pedagogy of mourning to overcome sadness and come to terms with death. At the same time, it is essential to consider the effect of modernity and science on shaping a civic discourse around death, which, according to Edgar Morin,[16] consists of moments of silence, commemoration, memorials, euthanasia legislation, and protective measures against global pandemics like Covid-19.[17]

Despite the author's reliance on important research in Arabic and other languages, a greater openness to French scholarship, particularly that of Jean Ziegler and Jean-Didier Urbain, as well as that of Maghrebi scholars like Belkacem Tababi and Raja Ben Slama, would have enriched its analytical scope.[18] While these authors discuss some of the issues Zeineldin addresses, they arrive at different conclusions and use different methods. This divergence underscores the need for further research on death that draws upon interdisciplinary approaches.

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[16] Edgar Morin, *L'homme et la mort* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), p. 57.

[17] Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Mort et pouvoir* (Paris: Editions Payot, 2010).

[18] Belkacem Tababi, *Death in Egypt and the Levant, vol. 1: Demographic Catastrophes during the Mamluk Period* and *vol. 2: Death Rituals in the Mamluk Period* (Tunis: La Maison Tunisienne du Livre, 2014); Raja Ben Slama, *Death and Death Rituals in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Muslim* (Tunis: Sud Editions, 1997).

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) is an independent social sciences and humanities institute that conducts applied and theoretical research seeking to foster communication between Arab intellectuals and specialists and global and regional intellectual hubs. The ACRPS achieves this objective through consistent research, developing criticism and tools to advance knowledge, while establishing fruitful links with both Arab and international research centers.

The ACRPS encourages a resurgence of intellectualism in Arab societies, committed to strengthening the Arab nation. It works towards the advancement of the latter based on the understanding that development cannot contradict a people's culture and identity, and that the development of any society remains impossible if pursued without an awareness of its historical and cultural context, reflecting its language(s) and its interactions with other cultures.

The ACRPS works therefore to promote systematic and rational, scientific research-based approaches to understanding issues of society and state, through the analysis of social, economic, and cultural policies. In line with this vision, the ACRPS conducts various academic activities to achieve fundamental goals. In addition to producing research papers, studies and reports, the ACRPS conducts specialized programs and convenes conferences, workshops, training sessions, and seminars oriented to specialists as well as to Arab public opinion. It publishes peer-reviewed books and journals and many publications are available in both Arabic and English to reach a wider audience.

The ACRPS, established in Doha in autumn 2010 with a publishing office in Beirut, has since opened three additional branches in Tunis, Washington and Paris, and founded both the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. The ACRPS employs resident researchers and administrative staff in addition to hosting visiting researchers, and offering sabbaticals to pursue full time academic research. Additionally, it appoints external researchers to conduct research projects.

Through these endeavours the ACRPS contributes to directing the regional research agenda towards the main concerns and challenges facing the Arab nation and citizen today.

The Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) is an independent institute for learning and research in the fields of Social Sciences, Humanities, Public Administration and Development Economics in Doha.

Through its academic programs and the research activities of its professors, the DI aims to achieve its mission of contributing to the formation of a new generation of academics and intellectually independent researchers who are proficient in international scholarship standards and modern interdisciplinary research methodologies and tools, and leading professionals who can advance human knowledge and respond to the needs of the Arab region, resulting in social, cultural and intellectual development.

The DI seeks to establish an intellectual hub that will benefit the Arab region in particular. The DI supports academic research that deals with Arab issues, in an atmosphere of institutional and intellectual freedom.

The DI works in cooperation with the ACRPS and the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic Language to facilitate its students and faculty members in their research of the most important current issues related to the Arab world and the wider international community. The involvement of students in the most important research projects is at the heart of the DI's interests.

The DI adopts Arabic as its official and primary language for education and research. English serves as an accompaniment to Arabic, with both languages used in presenting and research.

Twelfth Gulf Studies Forum

The Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Unit is holding its annual conference examining two main themes. The first, "Arab Gulf States and Transformations in the Arab Mashreq", raises key issues related to the recent, profound transformations in the Arab Mashreq as they relate to the Gulf states, mainly Israel's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip, that war's impact on Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq, and the fall of the Syrian regime. The second theme "Social Media in the Gulf: The Construction of the Political and Civil Sphere" addresses research issues related to the uses of social media in the Gulf context, and how its functions are determined accordingly.

13-14 December 2025

Seventh International Winter School

The ACRPS is holding its International Winter School on "The 'Post-Liberal Moment': A Paradigm Shift or a Passing Trend?". It will address the contemporary challenges facing liberal democracy in the Global North, its resilience and adaptability, and broader implications for international order. Additionally, the school will examine related themes such as the resurgence of authoritarianism and the future of human rights in the Global South. The school invites submissions from advanced PhD students and early career scholars specializing in various social science and humanities disciplines worldwide.

10-15 January 2026

Fifth Arab Graduate Students Conference

The ACRPS is holding the Arab Graduate Students Conference. The conference provides Arab doctoral students and recent PhD graduates of the social sciences and humanities based at Western universities an open space to present papers based on their PhD theses and receive critical feedback. This conference will give the participants the chance to benefit from discussions with their peers and with established academics.

11-13 April 2026

COVER ARTWORK

"We Did Not Find Any Land on Which to Spill Our Blood Upon" (2024)

Acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 99*99 cm, by **Amjad Ghannam**

Palestinian artist born in Jerusalem (1981). His work has been displayed in group exhibitions in Kassel, Jerusalem, Guangzhou, Haifa, and Beijing, and four solo exhibitions: "Portrait of Absence" (Ramallah, 2014); "Ras Roos" (Ramallah, 2016); "Maps of a Holy City" (Amman, 2021); and "Inhabitants of the Resurrection" (Ramallah, 2024).