Cities and societies in the Middle East

Syllabus for a special paper in the M. Phil. Modern Middle Eastern Studies

Hillary Term 2010

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Outline

The Middle East has a long urban tradition: Some of the world’s oldest cities - Istanbul, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo - are located here.

These cities, however, have experienced very different trajectories of modernization: Some have been reshaped during the late Ottoman modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries, some were expanded under colonial and mandate rule and others as a result of nationalist development projects.

The cities of the region have undergone profound changes over the twentieth century as they grew massively through the pressure of rural to urban migration and an increasingly dynamic demographic shift. As a result, the majority of the region’s citizens now live in cities: Middle Eastern societies have become, in only a few decades, urban societies. Urban environments are features shared throughout the region. It is this world of cities and urban societies which are now entering, if at different speeds and with different levels of infrastructural capacity and levels of internal conflict, the global world economy.

On the backdrop of a thorough discussion of the conceptual debates on the city in the Middle East - Islamic Cities, Oriental Cities, Arab Cities, Global Cities - this special paper aims at exploring the current processes of globalization, commodification and fragmentation, as well as the phenomena of exclusion, forced migration and ethnic and religious conflict the region’s major cities are facing today.

The perspective of the paper is conceptual and comparative, i.e. the tutorials will explore themes like urbanization, migration, informality etc., and focus on the larger global trends as well as cultural specificities. Students will have a chance to explore the cities in the region comparatively, why discussing these larger themes.

While the focus will be on cities in Turkey, Egypt, the Levant, and the Gulf region, we will try to introduce comparative perspectives including Iran, the Maghreb and Israel wherever possible.
Tutorial themes and reading lists

Introductory reading

Background reading


Pappé, Ilan, The Modern Middle East, Routledge, Milton Park, 2005
Chapter 4, Urban History


Key cities

Chapters 14, 16 and 16 (Contemporary Cairo (1798-1992)


Week 1 (Kerem Oktem)

The Islamic city

This tutorial aims at exploring the key debates that have shaped the academic field of the study of cities and urban societies in the Middle East. Particularly influential was Max Weber’s description of the Islamic city in contradistinction to the city in the West and as a largely static social and historical phenomenon. Terms such as the Islamic city, the Oriental city, the Arab city and the Ottoman city are used widely in the literature, and this tutorial aims at providing an overview of these different concepts and the epistemological traditions they represent.

Essay questions

1. ‘Historically, cities in the Muslim world lack the communal institutions of European cities in the Middle Ages and hence cannot really be defined as cities in functional terms’. Please discuss with reference to the case of cities in the Ottoman empire.

2. Contrast the academic discourse of the ‘Islamic city’ with the Arab and Ottoman cities literature.

3. Are there essentially unchangeable features of the ‘Islamic city’?

Reading List


Raymond, André, ‘Islamic city, Arab city: orientalist myths and recent views’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1994, vol. 21, Nr.1


**Week 2 (Leila Vignal)**

**The 19th and 20th century cities: Modernization and colonization**

Which were the forces and processes of modernization that have shaped cities in the Middle East since the 19th century? How have different countries and cities in the region been affected differentially? What is the legacy of these different trajectories?

**Essay questions**

1. How would you differentiate urban changes in the French colonial Empire and in the Ottoman Empire?
2. Is there such a thing as the emergence of a ‘dual city’ in the Ottoman/Arab 19th and 20th centuries?
3. Which urban legacy is characteristic of the Ottoman and colonial rules in the Arab world? How has it played upon the following independent nation-building?

**Reading List**


____, *The remaking of Istanbul: portrait of an Ottoman city in the Nineteenth century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993


Raymond, André, 2000, *Cairo*, Harvard University Press. Chapters 14, 16 and 16 (Contemporary Cairo (1798-1992))

Week 3 (Leila Vignal)

Urbanization, informality and poverty

Many cities in the Middle East struggle with the challenge of poverty and the substandard houses that were built during periods of heavy rural to urban migration, and that are still built due to the urban demographic growth. Cities face a shortage of housing for its residents, an issue that governments have not been able to handle in the last decades. As a consequence, the informal/illega l production of accommodation has become central to housing the poor and the lower middle classes. Contrary to preconceived notions, these informal (or semi-formal) settlements are often highly integrated into the fabric of the city in terms of social mobility, labour markets, industrial and services output - even though they are also sites of urban poverty and tend to be perceived by some of the authoritarian regimes in the region as threat to security and order.

Essay questions

1. In which sense are the informal neighbourhoods a central feature of Middle Eastern cities?
2. Are the informal neighbourhoods only a poverty issue?
3. “Regulating the informal settlements” has become a new governmental credo across the Middle East: what does it mean and imply? What alternatives are put in place? Which vision of the city does it carry?

Reading List


Week 4 (Leila Vignal)

The new urban territories of liberalisation and globalisation

Urban development and political economy are closely linked: Ever since the liberalisation of markets and the opening of trade borders in the region, cities have changed at breakneck speed, witnessing the emergence of new spaces and development areas, sustained by new investments of all kind. New categories of actors have asserted their role and new modes of social differentiation have emerged. Globalisation in terms of economic dependencies, but also in terms of lifestyles and consumption patterns has arrived in the region late with a slight delay, but is now in full force.

This tutorial, as well as the following one, will deal with the production of new territories, in linkage with economic opening and insertion into global networks. In Week 4, we will draw on the economic side of these changes.

Essay questions

1. Compare the recent development trajectories of Cairo and Dubai with reference to globalisation.
2. What are the main effects of globalisation and economic liberalisation on the economic territories of the city?
3. Informal, marginal, poor, minority: How are these substantives also part of the globalised urban fabric?

Reading List


Week 5 (Leila Vignal)

Consumption and the commodification of urban space

Building on the discussion in Week 4, this tutorial will explore how neo-liberal economic policies under mostly authoritarian governments have produced new residential, commercial and leisure-dedicated spaces in the cities in the Middle East, in the context of the rise of a mass-consumption society. New types of social relations engineered by new geographies of consumption emerge, as well as increased spatial and social fragmentation.

Essay questions

1. In which sense can we talk of a “fragmentation” of the urban space in contemporary Middle East cities? You will draw your reflection on the previous tutorial as well.

2. Is there a “McDonaldization” effect in the Middle East urban societies?

3. Discuss the regional and local economic roots of the new consumption and of new residential and commercial patterns, in the wider context of globalisation.

Reading List


New urbanism in the Gulf

The newly emerging cities in the Gulf seem to unite all the characteristics discussed in the previous tutorials, from globalisation, labour migration to commodification of the urban space. The cities in the Gulf are ‘Hyper-Global cities’ built on sand. They also develop at an unprecedented pace. Investments in real estate and commercial buildings generated in the Gulf have also spread around the Middle East and are rapidly transforming the urban geographies.

Essay questions

1. ‘The Gulf cities are more mirage than reality. Sooner or later, the property bubble will burst.’ Discuss with reference to the development of the Gulf states in the last two decades.

2. Do the emerging new Gulf cities constitute a model for urban and economic development in the Middle East?

3. Which challenges does Dubai face as a global city?

Reading list

Al-Rasheed, Madawi, Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf, Routledge, Milton Parks 2004
Chapter 4: Dubai. Global city and transnational hub


Chapter 10: Cities of Sand and Fog: Abu Dhabi’s Global Ambitions


Hannigan, John, Casino Cities, Geography Compass, 1/4, 2007, 959-975 http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/118529997/PDFSTART

Malecki, Edward J. and Michael C. Ewers, Labor migration to world cities: with a research agenda for the Arab Gulf, Progress in Human Geography, 2007; 31; 467


Chapter IV: Emerging Middle Eastern Knowledge Cities, Ali A. Alraouf
Week 7 (Kerem Oktem)

War, displacement and urban change

Many countries in the Middle East suffer from unresolved political, ethnic or religious conflicts that have led to displacement, forced eviction, the destruction of cities and the emergence of refugees. While cities in the region have been forced to absorb the massive influx of refugees, competition over scarce resources has often created resentment between different ethnic groups, as well as between marginalised groups and the state. The successive wars in Palestine have been accompanied by heavily securitised urban topographies both in the occupied territories and in Israel.

Essay questions

1. How would you describe the spatial strategies, the Israeli state has employed in dealing with Palestinians both in Israel proper and in the occupied territories? Discuss with reference to the concepts of ‘Urbicide’ and ‘Urban Ethnocracy’.

2. Compare two trajectories of ethnic cleansing, forced migration and marginalisation in Turkey/Kurdistan, Israel/Palestine and/or Lebanon.

3. To what extent can cities in the Middle East be described as cities marked by the consequences of ethnic, religious and political conflict?

Reading list


Çelik, Ayse Betül, “I miss my village!”: Forced Kurdish migrants in Istanbul and their representation in associations, New Perspectives on Turkey, No. 32, 2005


Dumper, Michael, Israeli Settlement in the Old City of Jerusalem, Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 21, No. 4, Summer, 1992


Esp. Chapter 5. ‘Barbed Boundaries’


Nagel, Caroline, ‘Reconstructing space, re-creating memory: sectarian politics and urban development in post-war Beirut’, *Political Geography* Vol. 21, Nr. 5, 2002


Öktem, Kerem, ‘Return of the Turkish “State of Exception’, *Middle East Report Online*, June, 2006
http://www.merip.org/mero/mero060306.html


_____, Incorporating the time and space of the ethnic ‘other’: nationalism and space in Southeast Turkey in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 10, Nr. 4, 2004


http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/119088513/PDFSTART

Week 8 (Kerem Oktem)

Opposition and resistance

While all countries in the region now follow some sort of neo-liberal economic policy, coupled with authoritarian policies, resistance is articulated through various political movements that are not limited to political Islam. This final tutorial will hence discuss to what extent these new social movements might create successful alternatives to the current neo-liberal and authoritarian consensus in the region and what kind of strategies of resistance they follow.

Essay questions

1. Which groups are at the focus of oppositional urban politics in Istanbul?
2. Is the label ‘Street Politics’ an accurate term to describe political movements in the Arab world?
3. How Islamic are urban movements in Turkey today?

Reading list


____, The "Street" and the Politics of Dissent in the Arab World, Middle East report, 226, Spring, 2003


Erman, Tahire and Aslihan Eken, ‘The “Other of the Other” and “unregulated territories” in the urban periphery: Gecekondu violence in the 2000s with a focus on the Esenler case, Istanbul’, *Cities*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2004


