

# Arab Cities Protest and Bleed

**Hadeel Natsheh**

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies  
National Chiao Tung University

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The Arab city is nowadays closer to a bloody battlefield in which different social and economic strata are contested, and great ideologies and narratives are closely related to city crisis and moving towards it. Indeed, the city has become a battleground, as if the city by its death is hurling its inhabitants into the torments of exile to other distant and cold cities, where some find their security through the fragmentation and disintegration of security in the cement forests of the Arab world. This article will address the process of migration from rural to urban areas and the problems of such process, which constitutes one of the most important factors in understanding the dynamics of the current Arab revolutions and their paths. Although many literature works link the process of urbanization with modernization, as Saad Ibrahim describes it, the Arab world suffers from accelerated urbanization, so that moving to the city becomes a real burden on modernization and development in the new Arab state (Ibrahim 1975:31).

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## Introduction

The events associated with turning the city into a battlefield, a conflict and a war on collective movement in some Arab countries, cannot be separated. This atrocity often stems from the rapid development of architecture and city under great population pressure. For example, in the last ten years, Ramallah city has doubled in terms of its architectural and urban expansion. The acceleration of construction has been a real burden on the city's infrastructure, which continues to expand on a daily basis, changing the character and shape of the city. Any observer of the changes can see the rise of giant buildings and the increase of the small, medium and large service institutions. Besides the change in the landscape of the cities, reaching the borders of the countryside, these changes took an integral part of the dream of Ramallah as a liberal city on the margins of occupation.

If the language is the way we communicate with each other, the primary expression of our symbolic and cultural identity, architecture and city are the arenas in which our fantasies are embodied. Our physical presence (architecture) is no less important than our symbolic existence (language). We often see the birth of urban diseases –so to speak– in the context of the dynamism through which large amounts of thousands and millions of people move into the city. For example, the rapid and sometimes turbulent emergence of cities, and the rapid emergence of psychological accumulations and social contradictions, shape frequent crises, one of which can be described as alienation.

City effect cannot be reduced on selves. Jean-Yves Tadier realized the place centrality in self-formation when he said, "Tell me where you live, I'll tell you what you will say" (Ghanemi 2000:161). It is clear that the city has its own story and narrative, and historical narrative, which makes the city a central location in interpreting anxiety and tension processes in the Arab world.

The Arab revolutions revealed the depth of Arab cities crisis, the depth of class and social disparities, and the difficulty of adapting the Arab city with the growing process of moving to it. The argument here is that the process of moving to the city, the difficulty of creating links between immigrants and its former inhabitants, as well as the difficulty of adapting to the city with the social and economic reality within its territory, all have created an unrest that led to the social protests that were called as the "Arab Spring."

The social and political revolutions that spread throughout the Arab world reflected the resentment and anger of social strata of economic development models that dominated these countries, in particular the policies that had taken place in many countries under the slogan of "national development policies", which in turn could not cope with the acceleration of moving to the cities in large areas of the Arab world, or adapting with large numbers moving to the city. The process of moving to the city influences the relationship with it. The rapid changes in its shape, its horizontal and vertical expansion, and the rise within it of different cultures sometimes disparate or contradictory, are the scene of social conflicts, the most important of which are in the sphere of class and cultural contradictions.

#### **Arab cities before the uprisings: urbanization in the Arab world**

There is no doubt that the penetration of colonization in the Arab social womb accompanied the rise of the city and the beginnings of the rural transition. The colonizer and its agents' need for institutional and governmental administrations and workers in all kinds of jobs played a polarizing role in attracting the countryside to the city. Therefore, most of the Arab cities are divided into classes between old nucleus neighborhoods and bright new neighborhoods, and those isolated in margins of the clusters of poverty and platelets cities. (Maqboul 2016:48) as if we are in two cities; the city of injustice and poverty, and the city of wealth and its inhabitants of the "Misters."

This historical process calls for the formation of a modern Arab city to understand these disparate and connected spaces -the city of poverty and city of wealth- because this urban division offers some of our answers to the turbulence generated by the displacement towards the city. Despite the importance of this division, it also hides the extent of interdependence and intertwining within a single city, as this distribution within the urban sphere keeps the working class in a spatial area close to the capital center, especially in major cities such as Cairo, making its presence and communication with Industry centers and government departments, one of the most important requirements in the city's ability to reproduce itself and expand it. The concentration of workers and employees in areas adjacent to the city also creates the possibility of the emergence of transient social networks. The process of bringing farmers and Bedouins into the city creates dense and focused spaces that provide a fertile environment for focusing social struggles and creating social and political networks capable of creating trade union and partisan regulatory frameworks, to achieve its Social and economic objectives. Tarrow and Tilly says: "Increasing numbers in cities means that relations between potential political actors are likely to increase. Through urbanization, workers can be grouped into large organizations to help the marginalized" (Tarrow and Tilly 2007).

We cannot understand the acceleration of urbanization in the Arab world without realizing the hidden ties that link urbanization with capitalism. As David Harvey explains: "Capitalization needs to be urbanized to accommodate the surplus products it produces. Capitalism and Urbanization" (Harvey 2012:5). The need to create the surplus necessarily calls for employment, and the need to sell the surplus requires transforming the rural economies into market economies.

New waves of accelerated urbanization are associated with the degradation of the rural environment, the continued drought in large areas such as Syria, poverty and other causes of natural and climatic imbalances. Therefore, a distinction must be made between urban expansion within the city based on capitalist expansion, and one linked to exogenous causes. In the first case, investments in cities are an attractive factor for rural people, and therefore migrant workers can be contained in the capitalist wheel. In other cases, however, urbanization rates are increasing and accelerating without possibility of absorbing expatriate workers, which causes economic, social and architectural imbalance, is associated with the rise of slums, the increase in unemployment rates, or the emergence of new social strata living on the city's crumbs and settling on its margins.

The acceleration of large numbers moving to cities led to narrow spaces that can absorb the migratory population, which contributed to the establishment of architectural margins in their spaces. These spaces called slums multiply globally, as the state of accelerated urbanization does not affect only the Arab world. David Harvey "Rebelling Cities" presented an approach on the impact of accelerated urbanization in the world, describing it as the most important phenomenon of the 21st century, and arguing that it foreshadows the replacement of the city's space by traditional Marxist class divisions -workers and capital- created by the working spaces, with classes by contradictions of that crude and misguided space that will govern conflicts in the twenty-first century. Harvey's aim is to redefine the city as a space for class struggle, instead of looking at the workspace (factories, for example) as a theatre of conflict.

The rise of the plateau cities and slums on the margins of cities represents a qualitative leap in understanding the reality of the Arab city and its destinies, the eruption of conflicts around and within it. As Janet Abu Lughod, in her research on urban spatial divisions in Rabat, emphasizes that these spatial and architectural margins reflect a field imbalance, social and economic crises. She also mentions that this context in the city is formed in order to maintain the separation of classes/segments from each other, these spatial separations as an expression of urban discrimination (Urban Apartheid) (Lughod 1980:131). Lughod defines this division as "urban discrimination," since in the folds of the divisions in Rabat and with the clear influence of the policies imposed by French colonialism, two cities were formed: one is the city of power and its center, which offers enormous advantages, whereas the other is the random city, which does not rise to be part of the urban planning process in major cities (ibid.)

The transformations witnessed by the Arab city in recent decades reflect the depth of the crisis left by diverse development and economic policies that have not been able to adapt themselves to the realities of these rapid changes and have, in turn, deepened the resulting social disorder. What Arab cities face are the same challenges faced by other cities: privatization of public sectors, especially those related to basic services such as the privatization of electricity services or the strengthening financial systems, which contributed to the increase in land prices. A combination of factors has also contributed to creating a horizon for the unrest that has characterized large-scale urban spaces of demonstrations and uprisings. How can we ignore the fact that the Arab revolutions as a whole took

from the city a central station in its struggle with the ruling regimes, from Tunisia and Cairo, through Damascus, to Sana'a? Even when the revolutions moved to the countryside, this move came after the city was blocked as a station in the ongoing conflict, which ended in civil wars in many Arab regions.

Neoliberal policies -liberalization of markets and economic restructuring in the Arab world- especially in non-oil countries, have attempted to attract investments that have contributed to the development of architecture limited to certain sectors such as tourism in Egypt or the construction of cities for middle and upper elites such as Rawabi in Palestine. Most of these investments came from oil-rich countries, emphasizing the geo-economic imbalance in the region, which in turn contributed to the increase in urbanization, especially by the Arab labor force entering the oil-rich countries. This imbalance in the region is also reflected within countries through the intensity of urban investment and its rural decline, deepening the imbalances of regional development. Massive numbers leave for the city, and this departure and migration hold the seeds of Arab revolutions and social rebellion and the struggle on public spaces that began in 2010 and has not ended to this day. How can we read the city space of conflict, and what are its aspects?

### **The city as a space of conflict: bloody transition**

In his book "Rebelling Cities," David Harvey introduces a new approach to the centrality of the city in political conflicts. Perhaps the most important element mentioned in his book is that the importance of the formation of different social classes in the city is not consistent with the classical industrial Marxist perspective of the classes, which is presented in Harvey's perspective as the basic structure in the social and political movements in the world today. He says: "The working class today is part of a group wider than the classes that focus their struggle on the city itself -in other words, the traditional concept of class struggle can be replaced by the conflict of all who produce and reproduce urban life."

The migration to the city, the growing importance of communication networks to the margins of urban centers, as areas and spaces not controlled by existing forces, are all issues that reflect the loss of the city's ability to produce itself and its functioning. It also reflects the disparate rivalry within it between the forces of a different organization that may take the forms of organized crime or sometimes armed military disobedience associated with great ideologies and narratives, such as Salafist Jihadist Islamic movements in Syria.

In the revolutionary times that were embodied in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria in 2010 with large social protests, the struggle for urban space appears, and the various social strata and ideological political forces that coexist until that moment began to compete in the city. In suppressing the demonstrations and the various forms of protest by the existing political regimes, the main purpose of employing the tools of repression is to restore control of public space and re-establish the political, economic and military dominance of urban space.

It is not surprising that the Syrian military machine bombed and destroyed cities or neighborhoods which divisions seem to be related to the accelerated urbanization in Syria. Thus, destruction -the fragmentation of monuments and construction- becomes one of the factors of success in war, because destructive forces can prevent the rise of a standard and stable regime in areas that are not controlled by it, turn the battle into those areas while maintaining the regimes in the controlled areas,

So that the two-dimensional destruction/reconstruction in Syria is based on the competitiveness of the conflicting forces, and the ability of each of these forces to provide standard systems of governance for residents of the space areas associated with them. The struggle over the city as a public space forms a transformation opportunity, not only to the forces that seek change, but also to the forces that constantly call for the continuity of the current status. Paradoxically, even when the forces that seek restoring the current status prevail, they are working on reproducing the city in line with their aspirations, they would destroy wide spaces that allow new urban plans to re-plan the city, ensuring their continuity and dominance over the city. In other words, The city does not remain the same even if the political and social forces that see the situation is its savior, since the destruction allows the restructuring of the city, which helps to close the gaps shown by the protests, especially in control systems.

### **The identity of the city in the Arab world: alienation of overcrowding**

It cannot be overlooked that the acceleration of urbanization was not matched by the acceleration of civil identity emergence, as explained by Saad Ibrahim in his approach to urbanization in the Arab world (Ibrahim 1975:34). This issue has serious implications, especially since the millions of people moving from rural to urban do not translate into a change in the nature of the different cultural perspective between the city and the village. In other words, since this transition does not produce a structural change in the nature of the identity of the traveler, as if the city attracts the poor to throw them to the sidelines, where there is no possibility of real integration between the classes. Apart from the real walls that occupy many cities and divide their layers into different neighborhoods and residential areas, there are hidden cultural and class walls that play their part in separating the city's segments. This cultural contrast between different social segments expresses a component of the struggles that grapple within urban space and that is expressed in the social disorder that accompanied the Arab uprisings.

The city has its way of creating a state of alienation or alienation from it. We do not belong to it in all its details and components, but we belong, we struggle in and around it and on it, but we feel that we are far from it. What is going on in the city is not only the process of moving from the space of the village to the city. It is also a structural difference in the nature and structure of social relations, and these imbalances may lead to feelings of alienation. The city's individuality is not consistent with rural intimacy, for example, and the social liquidity of cities is not necessarily consistent with its rural standards. Moving to the city is a transition that touches the very essence of everyday life and the nature of social relations that govern the day.

It is worth noting here that the countryside has not only moved to the city, but the city has expanded into rural areas. It is not only a destination for the peasant as the promised land; its architectural expansion has also led to the urbanization of the countryside. Rural land becomes an area for urban expansion of new and luxurious neighborhoods, such as Rawabi, which is built near Ramallah and its northern countryside.

Perhaps the most important point here is that in light of the fragility of the social sphere in the shadow of cities, autocratic ruling and colonialist regimes also invest in keeping these areas fragile. Urban planning is often employed in the process of creating control mechanisms that contribute to the fragmentation process of social protests, turning this planning tool into an attempt to promote class inequalities between broad social segments.

## Conclusion

Arab urban societies are beset by major imbalances that are a result of decades of political and organizational neglect. Issues related to urbanization, urban planning and the process of moving to the city have become part of the increasingly problematic Arab societies. It has many dimensions that cannot be denied or ignored. The popular protests that spread in the Arab world, which quickly extinguished, re-examined the city.

The state of urbanization is one of the cornerstones of the emergence of widespread social conflicts that led to irreconcilable imbalances. The Arab uprisings can be read from this perspective, and we can explain the reasons for these uprisings based on the process of moving to the city, and what this process created from the convergence of different social segments in its womb, that ultimately led to severe social and economic imbalances to be part of the causes of the uprisings and its progress.

What is central here is that we cannot begin dissecting the factors of the emergence of the Arab protests without talking about the city and urbanism, its spaces of alienation, the relationship between its margins and centers, urbanization and urban migration without Urbanism and economic and social policies that did not adapt to the acceleration of this phenomena in the last two decades. In other words, the move to the city has fuelled the bloody conflicts in different Arab countries, as it remains a key factor in the manufacture of these bloody conflicts that cannot be read in isolation.

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