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Middle East Brief

The Birth of Sadr City and Popular Protest in Iraq

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One year after the July 1958 revolution that overthrew Iraq's monarchy, Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Qasim's republican government inaugurated Madinat al-Thawra (Revolution City, today known as Sadr City) as a satellite city northeast of Baghdad. Originally planned to contain five or six sectors, today Thawra has nearly one hundred sectors and, though estimates vary, is home to more than 2.5 million people. The construction of Thawra is widely regarded in Iraq as a heroic act by Prime Minister Qasim: the building of a model housing settlement to accommodate the thousands of rural migrants who had until then been living in reed mat and mudbrick huts. The project became emblematic of a modernizing and urbanizing Iraq; Madinat al-Thawra is still cited as a model for what state-led development can accomplish in the country.

The birth of Thawra, however, was not due to the benevolent action of a populist leader, nor was it a model for top-down development projects in Iraq. This Brief argues that migrants who came to Baghdad in the early- to mid-twentieth century, primarily from southeastern provinces, formed an enduring urban underclass that, throughout the past eight decades, has collectively organized local and mass political movements whose demands led to better wages, urban planning, and housing projects—including Madinat al-Thawra. Although Thawra was created in response to years of workers organizing, striking, and protesting, it was not designed in collaboration with those who would eventually reside there.

The creation of Thawra was in fact marked by violent land dispossession on Baghdad's outskirts, generating a mass exodus of rural cultivators to

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the capital. The enclave's lack of basic services, such as water, electricity, and transportation networks, exacerbated economic inequality and hardened patterns of class-based spatial segregation. This dispossession and deprivation resulted in Thawra becoming an enduring center of mass social movements. That continues into the present day, as when many of Sadr City's inhabitants joined Iraqis across the country in October 2019 to protest against the country's corrupt political elite and to demand better jobs and wages, clean water, electricity, and housing, as well as a reorganization of the post-2003 political system.

The Formation of an Urban Underclass: The “Amarization” of Baghdad

The twentieth century in Iraq was marked by a substantial exodus, as thousands of cultivators in the countryside, especially from southeastern Iraq, moved to cities to escape harsh conditions in provinces like Amara and Kut. Their poverty and hunger were so dire that migrants often ate dates with the pits intact because they could not afford to discard anything with nutritional value. Though internal migration increased during the British administration of Mandatory Iraq (1921–32), migration rates reached a crescendo in the 1950s, when the extent of migration from the province of Amara to Baghdad was estimated by the Iraqi historian Abdul Razzak al-Hilali to be a “full cargo of ten lorries [trucks] per day.”¹ Established Baghdadis disparagingly referred to these migrants as the *shurug* (“easterners,” from the formal *shuruq*, colloquial plural *shargawiyya*), a term that reinforced a form of geographic otherness. The historian Hanna Batatu went so far as to describe the consequent urbanization of the city as the “Amarization” of Baghdad.²

This mass rural exodus was central to the creation of an urban underclass in larger cities like Baghdad and Basra before the 1958 revolution. Their spatial segregation was visually evident, as migrants adapted customary reed mat and mudbrick architecture associated with southeastern Iraq to the material, climatic, and hydraulic conditions of the capital. These dwellings were imprecisely referred to in bureaucratic shorthand as *sarifa* settlements—that is, roughly, “reed huts”—implying their impermanence. And their inhabitants were referred to as “*sarifa*-dwellers” in government and press publications, which were usually produced in English. The curious Arabic-English hybrid term “*sarifa*-dweller” represented rural migrants as essentially a new urban social class. It also directly echoed the term “slum dweller” used in Europe and North America.

Rural migrants—both those who willingly fled and those who were forcefully dispossessed from their ancestral homes—employed strategies of land occupation in the capital to create a complex and ever-growing city where an individual could arrive, find a plot of land with help from relatives and neighbors, and build a dwelling that met their basic needs for shelter. A range of customary practices governed land tenurial arrangements between state institutions, individual landowners, and migrant households. There were established systems of mutual aid. And the architectural form of reed mat and mudbrick rooms clustered around communal courtyards with shared laundry and cooking facilities allowed for flexible living arrangements and the construction or demolition of rooms as people arrived, left, or were born.

Contrary to assertions that they were traditional and unmodern, migrants were not a monolithic group, and many frequented cinemas and cafés and engaged in

transgressive forms of romantic and sexual attachment, including visiting brothels. Though migrant women may not have worn fashionable skirt suits, they were heavily engaged in economic activity: They were central to the production of dairy products, for example, and traveled with their children and animals into wealthy neighborhoods every morning to sell fresh milk and other sundries.

Migrant settlements often included distinct yet overlapping zones for residential, commercial, and animal husbandry uses. Migrants from the southeastern marshes, for example, often inhabited areas that were distinct from other areas of migrant settlement. These areas featured large open courtyards, earth architecture, reed mat shelters, and nearby wading pools for buffaloes—all of which defied rigid categories of urban versus rural. Instead, families used flood plains, water channels, and excavated ditches to reproduce the environmental features of the wetlands they had left behind, in order to support their buffalo-centered livelihoods in the capital. So buffaloes and Chevrolets, along with reed mats and concrete, populated the landscape of the rapidly urbanizing capital.

The economic inequality between those who lived in migrant settlements and those who lived in villas in Baghdad's new suburbs continued to grow, however, and contributed to a culture of collective organizing among the capital's poorest inhabitants. Worker strikes not only shaped post-independence Iraqi political movements but also influenced the spatial transformation of Baghdad, as workers in the 1940s demanded decreased rents, free transportation, the right to occupy land, and more durable forms of housing. The authorities often met these demands because striking workers had the ability to hurt the Iraqi economy by paralyzing businesses and major infrastructure, such as brick factories, oil companies, railways, and textile firms. Cultivators and rural migrants were essential, low-ranking members of the army, police, and civil service and were employed in large numbers in the construction, dairy, date palm, shipping, and oil industries: They were the human infrastructure that built and sustained the Iraqi state.

In November 1952, a series of small strikes turned into a massive protest movement, remembered in Iraq as the *Intifada*. The *Intifada* was a win for the protesting masses because it led to the institutionalization of price ceilings and the abolition of consumption taxes on fruits and vegetables; in an effort to appease student protesters, college tuition fees were likewise eliminated. The government also reduced import duties from 40 percent to 10 percent on items heavily consumed by

rural migrants, such as tea, sugar, and cotton piece goods.³ Low-income primary school students began to receive free food and clothing, while all students would receive free books and stationery supplies. Most of these concessions were directed at the poorest classes in Baghdad, reflecting the Iraqi ruling elite's apprehension with respect to the revolutionary potential of migrants in the capital, whose material conditions and acts of resistance were likened by the ruling elite to the *lumpenproletariat* in 1789 France.

The Development Board and Urban Design

In 1950, the Iraqi parliament created the Development Board (*Majlis al-I'mar*) to administer 70 percent of the revenues from Iraq's oil concessions and to design and oversee the implementation of all development projects, such as hydroelectric dams, roads, and irrigation schemes.⁴ The creation of the Board established a fiscal structure parallel to Iraq's governmental institutions, given that oil revenues would be deposited into the Board's separate account at the National Bank of Iraq.⁵ Though the Board was chaired by the prime minister, it also consisted of ten appointed members and three ex-officio members. Members were largely government officials and private sector experts (often British and American consultants) who led four technical sections covering irrigation, industry, transportation, and agricultural development. Given its make-up, the creation of the Board facilitated the "grabbing" of Iraqi oil revenues by British and American firms who sought preferential status as contractors when it came to implementing the Board's flood control schemes and other massive capital investment projects.⁶

In 1956, the Wadi Tharthar Flood Control Scheme, one of the Board's priorities, was completed: It nearly eliminated the existential threat of perennial flooding that had plagued Baghdad for centuries. The project was intended to provide 125,000 kilowatts of electric power and irrigate 200,000 to 300,000 acres of land.⁷ It also allowed for the eastern expansion of the capital, which had been limited to the thresholds delineated by a complex system of flood dykes. Predictably, in the mid-1950s right before the completion of the Wadi Tharthar project, the Iraqi Development Board and the lord mayor of Baghdad hired two separate urban planning firms to create master plans premised on the lateral expansion of Baghdad.

In anticipation of the completion of Wadi Tharthar, the lord mayor hired the British architectural and town planning consultants Minoprio, Spenceley and

Macfarlane (MSM) as early as 1954 to develop a master plan for the capital. The MSM plan identified reed mat and mudbrick migrant settlements as a “human social problem” that could not be addressed simply via a technocratic approach to the city’s physical infrastructure:

[T]he provision of new roads for traffic circulation will solve what is essentially a mechanical problem; but the provision of new homes, the clearance of slum areas, and the relief of over-crowding is, above all, a human social problem. However mechanically efficient the town may become, however imposing may be its new buildings, unless housing conditions can be drastically improved, it will be but a façade and a sham, hiding a canker that will one day manifest itself in social unrest and dissatisfaction.⁸

The political future of Baghdad was thus premised on the mass displacement and resettlement of migrant settlements, especially those situated behind the eastern flood dyke that would become prime real estate for Baghdad’s suburban expansion after the completion of Wadi Tharthar. And MSM argued that the improvement of housing conditions in Baghdad and the city’s political stability were inextricably linked.

Doxiadis and the National Housing Program

Foreign advisors on the Development Board, such as the former British member of parliament and early advocate for a pan-European government Lord Arthur Salter, agreed that it was necessary to finance housing projects to ameliorate social unrest among “politically dangerous” sections of the population—that is, rural migrants:

There is a strong and widespread resentment against the Development Board among many sections of the population (and especially those which are most likely to be affected by subversive propaganda and to be politically dangerous). . . . There is therefore the strongest reason for substantial expenditure of a kind which will bring quick and visible benefits. Among these housing, pure-water systems, and detailed and immediate help to farming and husbandry.⁹

So in 1955, the same year that Salter published his *The Development of Iraq: A Plan of Action*, the Board decided to hire the Greek architect and city planner Constantinos A. Doxiadis to eradicate all reed mat and mudbrick homes in Baghdad and throughout Iraq as part of an ambitious National Housing Program. The Board also added a fifth technical section dedicated to housing, which would supervise Doxiadis Associates (DA) and provide input

on housing design, land acquisition, materials, labor, and financing.

The housing program began with a five-year plan called the Basic Foundation Program (1956–62) that would target 256,000 families; the overall housing program would span twenty-five years and was called The Great Program. In order to build new houses for rural migrants, DA would have to displace *sarifa*-dwellers from the lands they occupied. But this dispossession came with the promise that migrants would be resettled on the same or nearby land, either in state-built brick and concrete houses or on plots of land that they would own and on which they could build their new dwellings. Their lives would be integrated into a serviced neighborhood, complete with a community center, primary school, public park, and kindergarten. There would also be some accommodation for families that raised cattle, though pedestrian traffic would be segregated from animal traffic.

Sixteen months before the July 14, 1958 revolution, on March 16, 1957, the Board finally gave DA authorization to implement the Eastern Baghdad Slum Clearance Project. This project’s primary objective was to “provide opportunities for the *sarifa* dwellers living outside the [eastern] bund of Baghdad.”¹⁰ Doxiadis understood that the so-called urban land question was at the heart of unequal material and housing conditions in Baghdad and would be the primary barrier to implementation of any housing scheme. This posed a particular challenge, since land acquisition for state-funded low-income housing projects followed a strictly political calculus. For example, when Doxiadis’s firm managed to secure a plot of land on which low-income migrants whose dwellings were to be demolished could be resettled, the Baghdad police department protested the decision, arguing that the land should be allocated instead for police housing. The proposed location of the eastern Baghdad housing development was thus highly contested and was eventually pushed further northeast, out of sight of middle- and high-income families—and where there was little to no access to paved roads, bus transportation networks, electricity, or water.

While land acquisition procedures for the eastern Baghdad development were being resolved—which would not be until September 1958 (that is, until after the revolution)—the firm focused on the implementation of its 120-unit experimental housing scheme in *western* Baghdad. This housing project was for low-income families with a monthly household income between 20 and 40 Iraqi dinars (approximately 26 to 53 USD). This higher income bracket alone disqualified most *sarifa*-

dwellers from applying for the housing scheme, along with the further qualification that they should have been residents of the capital for at least five years. Moreover, these houses were specifically allocated for officials and employees working for various ministries in Iraq.

But even though these homes in the western Baghdad development scheme were not intended for *sarifa*-dwellers, who would be resettled as part of the long-term Eastern Baghdad Slum Clearance Project, this project was supposed to yield lessons and best practices that would inform the development of Thawra. The western Baghdad undertaking served as a pilot, which had to demonstrate that the effectiveness of the housing projects was worth the political cost of displacing rural migrants against their will. In a letter dated January 5, 1959, an assistant resident engineer provided insight into the ways in which new homeowners had adapted and modified the architectural design in western Baghdad to suit their needs. He reported, for example, that residents had added ovens (*tannurs*) for cooking bread on the roofs, and that clothes and dishes were washed in the streets instead of in courtyards as the architects had intended. He also noted that parapets overlooking the community squares had been modified by residents and that concrete benches and fountains had fallen into disrepair.¹¹

When Doxiadis first arrived in Baghdad, he had criticized earlier housing projects built by the Ministry of Social Affairs for being poorly designed, based on residents' having felt the need to make additions to their homes. Perhaps the western Baghdad housing scheme was likewise in need of better design that responded to residents' actual needs and desires. An anonymous article published in *The Architects' Journal* in 1960 gave voice to such a critique, evaluating Doxiadis's western Baghdad development in light of his lecture at the Royal Institute of British Architects:

Has he [Doxiadis] ever really put himself in the position of the man living in the n'th house of the m'th row of his West Baghdad? We must design areas for people, in their variety and nonconformity and need for identification with a recognizable place. Dr. Doxiadis has his view of the Parthenon from his office. It is his moral duty to provide the equivalent for Ali in house n, row m. Otherwise he is one more false prophet like the rest of them. Is it too much to ask from a profession, which thinks too much and lives too little?¹²

The Unfulfilled Development of Thawra

After the 1958 July Revolution, Abd al-Karim Qasim's government continued the Development Board's and Doxiadis's housing projects, though Qasim appointed Iraqi architects, including Rifat Chadirji and Kahtan Madfai, to lead and supervise the projects. The following year, when the eastern Baghdad development plan was finally implemented, just over 900 houses were actually constructed, and these were distributed to low-income rural migrants who served as civil servants. The rest of the expropriated land was divided into 144-square-meter plots and distributed to migrants for a nominal fee. The government instructed Thawra's new residents that they could temporarily construct reed mat and mudbrick dwellings on their new plots, but they would eventually be required to build brick houses in accordance with the "simple designs" prepared by state authorities.¹³

Qasim's choice of the revolutionary appellation *Madinat al-Thawra* was meant to commemorate the end of the thirty-seven-year reign of the British-installed Hashemite monarchy. More importantly, the name paid tribute to the early residents of Thawra: the rural migrants whose decades of activism, strikes, and protests—often conducted in alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party—had drastically changed the demographic make-up of the capital, turned the tide against the monarchy, and built popular support for Qasim's government. Yet Qasim's government also implemented a number of anti-migration measures.

Thus, in 1961, the state issued a directive prohibiting the construction of reed mat and mudbrick architecture within the municipal boundaries of the capital, and mandated that all such settlements be removed from the capital by early 1963.¹⁴ By the end of 1963, local authorities, often with military assistance to subdue those who resisted, had relocated an estimated 55,000 migrants to newly planned settlements. Despite his outward support for migrants, Qasim's first priority was to provide housing for those migrants who strengthened the disciplinary institutions of the state through service in the army or police, which resulted in the devaluing of migrants who were not directly employed by the state.¹⁵



Thawra Quarter is located in the upper right corner of this Baghdad City Bus Map. Directorate of Public Transportation, Baghdad, Iraq, 1961

Contrary to the needs and preferences of migrants, Thawra was located far away from Baghdad's central business district, where many of the settlement's residents were employed. Doxiadis Associates had also recommended the creation of a new army canal east of the Tigris that would replicate the river's microclimatic effects. Like the eastern flood dyke, however, the canal inadvertently created a large psychological and physical barrier and would come to demarcate Thawra as yet another territory of poverty relative to the capital. The canal would later be accompanied by a major highway further enhancing the divide. Though the redistribution of the barely developed plots of land and housing did materially benefit migrants who first settled in Thawra, subsequent waves of migrants had to again rely on strategies of land occupation and autonomous building to find a place for themselves in the capital. Today, Thawra has expanded to nearly a hundred sectors and itself serves as a center for a number of informal settlements that welcomed internally displaced persons after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.¹⁶

On February 8, 1963, a coalition of Ba'thist and pan-Arabists staged a coup against the republican government, resulting in Qasim's execution and the appointment of Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr as prime minister of Iraq. Thawra was one of the main areas that resisted the coup—and perhaps partly owing to its residents' perceived loyalty to the deposed Qasim, the new government and subsequent Ba'thist regimes under Saddam Hussein largely neglected the maintenance and development of Thawra. The community centers, availability of drinking water, trash collection, road networks, schools, parks, and buses promised by the DA plan either took decades to be achieved or were never realized.

More than two decades after its establishment, Thawra's conditions were so dire that Saddam Hussein commissioned the Iraqi architect Maath Alousi to conduct a slum clearance exercise in Thawra, which Hussein had renamed Saddam City.¹⁷ Alousi described Saddam City as having vast areas of low-rise, high-density development with narrow alleys, cul-

de-sacs, and grey concrete row houses. In contrast to the ambitious modernist planning exercises of the monarchic and republican governments, the Ba'thist approach was to fund a "self-aid" operation wherein residents would be responsible for upgrading (i.e., cleaning, painting, and sweeping) their own blocks. Though the Baghdad municipality provided some basic resources, technical supervision was limited, and the process was deeply decentralized. This minor upgrading exercise did result in some incremental improvement; but the decades-long lack of public investment in infrastructure continues to plague Thawra/Saddam City/Sadr City to the present day.

This sustained institutional and infrastructural deficit in Thawra, along with a lack of spatial integration with the center of Baghdad, created an opening for networks of mutual aid between residents and the proliferation of charitable religious organizations. In lieu of DA's proposed state-built community centers and mosques, small religious centers and libraries called *husayniyas* began to proliferate in Thawra.¹⁸ Shi'i welfare associations and *wukalas* (informal networks of *khums* collectors) also began to fill the gap in service provision in Thawra.

This pattern of neglect continues to the present day. Not only were the grievances of dispossessed cultivators from southeastern Iraq and their descendants never fully addressed, but those grievances also changed and multiplied over time until their latest incarnation in 2019's October Revolution.

Though relegated to the periphery, rural migrants and their descendants transformed peripheral settlements into core sites of resistance, providing popular bases of support to communists, nationalists, and, later, Shi'i Islamists. Just as self-organization was the ordering principle in reed mat and mudbrick settlements, Thawra, perhaps out of necessity, continues to be a space for collective organizing and political opposition. Popular mobilization in Baghdad today, therefore, cannot be understood by focusing solely on the post-2003 period or on ethnosectarianism. Rather, these movements are part of a longer history of protest in Iraq linked to the unrealized promises of top-down economic and spatial planning efforts that have disproportionately affected Baghdad's poorer residents over the past century.

Conclusion

What historian Hanna Batatu called the "Amarization" of Baghdad and the rise of an urban underclass have fundamentally transformed the political trajectory of Iraq. Urban planning interventions refashioned prior patterns

of settlement along class, tribal, or religious lines into purportedly secular, class-based patterns of segregation along income brackets, which set economic inequality in stone alongside the capital's growing concrete landscape. In both the popular and elite imaginations, the *sarifa*-settlements-turned-urban-slum remains a site of dystopia, marked as distinct and inferior. Moreover, Thawra/Saddam City/Sadr City continues to be a site of popular contention, challenging any conception of a unidirectional power dynamic from the core to the periphery. In this manner, the urban fabric of Thawra/Saddam City/Sadr City has become the corporeal, fragmented manifestation of an incorporeal Iraqi national identity.

One way to overcome this divide would be to listen again to the voices on the street: Instead of suppressing protesters or coopting their material demands, the Iraqi government could choose to redistribute power and wealth to its disenfranchised citizens, whose lives and labor built the state of Iraq. Given the political impasse in Iraq today, this path might finally break the country's multigenerational cycles of dispossession and political strife.

Endnotes

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