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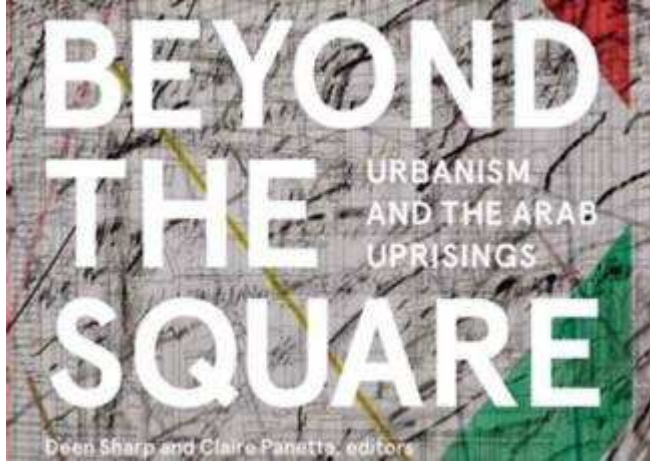
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# The Space of Revolt: An Investigation into the Urban Geography of the Arab Spring

Nov 14 2016 by [Roman Stadnicki](#)



**Book review: Deen Sharp and Claire Panetta (eds.) [Beyond the Square. Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings](#). New York: Terreform/Urban Research, 2016.**

*Beyond the square. Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings* aims to analyze the dialectic relations between political change and urbanization. Based on investigations carried out in the Arab world and the Middle East, it shows the very strong urban dimension of the uprisings that have occurred since 2010, in which cities were simultaneously the main scene of events, one of the reasons behind them, and a laboratory for innovative practices. Edited by Deen Sharp and Claire Panetta, the book is essentially the result of work of young researchers, mainly doctoral students (the great majority of which is based in the USA), indicating the vitality of doctoral research on the Middle East since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. The book is a collection of nine essays covering eight countries: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iran, Turkey, Bahrain, and Algeria. Rather than attempting to summarize each of them, I will look at five main underlying issues that contribute to the general premise of the work, although the general introduction does not refer to them in exactly the same terms. On the contrary, it places the nine case studies within the context of contemporary thinking about recent social movements in the region in general, and then discusses their role in the analysis of socio-spatial dynamics, the processes of territorial fragmentation, and neoliberal urbanism. The purpose of the essays is to allow these three main analytic categories to be better conceptualized. It is not entirely clear whether this has been achieved, as we will discuss below.

## **Addressing the Political Event, Indirectly**

The first major issue on which the book is based is that addressing the political event indirectly—here, through its effects on the urban space—is productive. On the one hand, it frees us to a large extent from the chronology of political upheavals, which can often be confusing, and hence allows us to avoid the problem of factual history, as highlighted by [Catusse, Signoles and Siino](#) (2015). On the other hand, approaching the event via the urban space can create a narrative from a different angle, showing how the event is experienced at micro-scales, looking not only at the changes, but also the continuities in daily life, observing

whether socio-spatial structures change or not, etc. To illustrate this point, we can take the case of Amman, presented in the book by Aseel Sawalha. The factual background here is not the “Arab Spring,” which did not affect Jordan to the same extent as its neighbors, but the massive influx of Syrian refugees in the capital. While a large number of surface analysis have presented this migratory phenomenon in terms of demographic risks and threats to Jordanian society, the local surveys carried out by the author show, on the contrary, a cultural, artistic and social effervescence as a direct consequence of this influx, to the point of producing a phenomenon of bottom-up gentrification in the district of Jabal al-Weibdeh she investigated. This phenomenon had not been anticipated by local urban policies, which focused more on the development of the new Al-Abdali business district, a major project inspired by neoliberalism.

## **Urban Studies and Social Movements**

The second key issue is to show in concrete terms how urban studies can contribute to our understanding of social movements. For example, current urban policies in some countries of the region, which have led to brutal segregation and forced displacements, as described by Khaled Adham in the new towns in Egypt, provide reasons for mobilization (p.12). But, at the same time, they can sometimes offer fertile soil for the actual expression of protest, and the invention of a new form of “street politics” (Bayat 2013). Thus, there were uprisings in a number of gated communities in Cairo between 2011 and 2013, despite the security measures and social selection typically found there. This paradoxical view of the notion of fragmentation, no longer considered in the book as an exclusively negative process, is extremely interesting: “[not] treating fragmentation as a uniformly negative force and an obstacle to the successful development of broad-based protest movements” (p.18). Likewise, in Teheran, Azam Khatam shows how major road networks, whose layout inevitably causes fragmentation, enabled demonstrators from the middle and upper classes of the districts in the north to come together with those from the working-class districts in the south during the “Green Movement” of 2009. In this way, Valiasr Street, the main north-south thoroughfare, became a heterogeneous protest space, which, for the period of the mobilization, eliminated the socio-economic boundaries created in the capital by the Iranian authorities.

## **Urban Space and Protest Movements**

The case of Teheran, like others dealt with in the book, including Istanbul, provides powerful evidence of the centrality of the urban space to the construction of protest movements; this is the third issue addressed in *Beyond the Square*. According to Nezar Alsayyad and Muna Güvenç (2013), quoted in the introduction, “Even in the twenty-first century, urban space remains the most important arena for the expression of dissent and demand for social change” (p.11). It is well known that it was the urban development plan for the Gezi Park in Istanbul, one of the many showcase ambitions of the Turkish authorities for economic domination and modernization, that triggered the massive social uprising during the summer of 2013. Although it only lasted a short time, it had long-term effects in the informal districts of Istanbul, the *gecekondu*s, as described by Duygu Parmaksizoglu. She mentions the creation of new “neighborhood-based solidarity platforms” (p. 163), enabling the convergence of neighborhood protests, and involving stakeholders who were previously unknown to each other. While the urban space has been shown to be central to the development of uprisings, its authoritarian management can also harm and hinder this development. The most radical illustration is of course the case of Syria, where Deen Sharp talks of “urbicide”, defined as the deliberate destruction of an urban space, which, according to the author, started well

before the war of 2011 with the ultra-authoritarian and segregationist urban development policy of the Assad government. It also brings to mind Manama in Bahrain, where Ollamh and Lanthier (writing here under pseudonyms) describe how the destruction of Pearl Square enabled the authorities to cut short the rally by demonstrators in the city center in 2011. However, the brutal crackdown by security forces had two consequences; first, it pushed the uprising to the outskirts of Manama where it spread, making it more difficult to control and providing the conditions for its continuation; secondly, it became sectarian, as the protest movement was essentially confined to the Shiite shanty villages on the outskirts (opposed to the Sunni government). Finally, in Palestine, Helga Tawil-Souri argues that the policy of making urban spaces safe—through the creation of “exopolises”, walled enclaves that keep the residents away from any form of urban and national citizenship—prevents any mass uprising of impoverished urban youth.

### **Beyond the Central Spaces of Capital Cities**

Avoiding focusing on the central urban spaces of capital cities is suggested by the actual title of the book, *Beyond the Square*, and is the fourth issue explored by the essays. Observing Tahrir square to the exclusion of all else, as was notably the case of some western media during the Egyptian crisis of 2011-2013, carries the risk of overlooking social and political changes at two levels: first, the level of outer urban spaces, even though it is here that the main demographic growth has occurred in the Middle East for several decades, and second, the level of secondary towns, which also saw uprisings in and after 2011. This pitfall has been avoided here, thanks notably to the essays about the villages on the outskirts of Bahrain, about the Fikirtepe district of Istanbul, about Kufr 'Aqab between Jerusalem and Ramallah, etc. However, as pointed out by the authors in the introduction, the wealth of studies on the “great squares” of the Arab World since 2011 constitutes only a small part of the global analysis of the uprisings in the region. But a large number of these analyses, seen from the sole perspective of political or media tactics, are often disembodied and stripped of any ethnographic content or localization. Rather than contrasting the “square” and its “opposite”, we should therefore seek to advocate more generally the considerable heuristic value of socio-spatial analysis, linking, as far as possible, city centers and the peripheries.

### **The Discrete Post-Revolution Arab Transformations**

The fifth and final issue: not to overlook the more discrete socio-spatial transformations that followed the “Arab revolutions”, including in countries that were affected little or not at all by the shock waves. Once again, the local level proves to be relevant to show that profound societal changes were triggered by the major political upheavals in the Arab world (see [Oualdi, Pagès El Karoui, Verdeil](#) 2014; Stadnicki 2015). In her essay on sexual harassment in Egypt, Susana Galan shows that the large number of local anti-harassment initiatives, including street art, interactive web-based mapping applications, self-defense courses, etc., have helped redefine the role of women in the public space (see also [Piquemal](#), 2015). The book also stresses the importance of moving the cursor beyond large-scale mobilizations. Algeria does not appear on the maps of the “Arab Spring”, even though there were riots and self-immolations in several regions in early 2011. However, this is not to say that there were no circumstantial and spatially circumscribed protests, as shown by demonstrations for access to housing in Laghouat and those for more social justice in working-class districts such as Bab el-Oued in Algiers, documented by Ed McAllister in the book, and which seem to continue today.

Overall, the essays in this book address these five major (urban) research issues in the Middle East positively, and they even help define and justify them. Consequently, more than a “new Middle East” (p.7), postulated by Deen Sharp and Claire Panetta to have emerged from the Arab uprisings, we would prefer to see, together with other authors quoted in the book (e.g Gregory 2013; Kanna 2012; Allegra *et al* 2013), discussion of a “new urban issue” for the region! These events offer the opportunity to fundamentally redefine urban categories and concepts. It is perhaps on this point that we have the greatest reservations about the book. In the theoretical frame of their general introduction, the authors use notably the categories of spatial fragmentation and neoliberal urbanism, which, as we can now see, entail processes that broadly steer and resist change. Would it not be equally relevant today to think in terms of new urban cultures, anti-establishment capital, urban citizenship, etc., categories that are missing or barely touched on in a book that is nonetheless built around the dialectic relation between mobilization and urbanization? This would help us think ahead to the mid- to long-term effects of political changes on urban societies. We can thus observe two unfortunate tendencies, one a lack of conceptual clarity (for example, the expression “flexibility of the sociospatial phenomenon” (p.7) is not very clear), the other intellectual simplification, with the systematic use of “neoliberal urbanism” (which is not defined) providing the background to all the cases discussed in the essays. Is it necessary to point out that the implications of neoliberalism for the city (and, moreover, the economy) are not the same in Algiers, Manama and Ramallah, and that in these three cities they differ at least as much again from those characterizing the large on-going projects in Istanbul and Amman, which are often set up as a paragon of neoliberal urbanism in the region (Legros 2014; see also for other regions, Pinson, Morel Journal 2016).

Finally, we agree with the authors that the socio-spatial dynamics of the political changes that have occurred in recent years in the Middle East are rich in meaning but have been largely overlooked by research. But, we would ask the authors to qualify their arguments in the light of studies in French that also fill this gap, but which are not mentioned in their book, in spite of the fact that some have been translated into English ([Verdeil](#) 2011; Stadnicki, Vignal, Barthel 2014, etc.). Current work on the subject in English is fairly exhaustively reviewed, although a minor point is that there are too many references in the body of the text that are not mentioned in the bibliography – a minor weakness of a book, which was perhaps produced too rapidly, but long-awaited and very welcome!

[This is the English translation of the same book review that appeared in [French](#) earlier on Jadaliyya.]

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