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# DESTRUCTIVE CREATIONS

SOCIAL-SPATIAL TRANSFORMATIONS  
IN CONTEMPORARY BAGHDAD

Omar Sirri



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# Destructive Creations: Social-Spatial Transformations in Contemporary Baghdad

Omar Sirri

## About the Author

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## Abstract

This working paper examines social-spatial transformations in contemporary Baghdad by zooming in on two of the city's most frequented consumer districts, Karada and Mansour. By way of ethnographic fieldwork, I foreground the entanglements between violence, property and consumption. Baghdad's transformations over nearly two decades are not simply a product of urban violence; nor are they only a result of the privatisation of formerly public property; nor are they merely a consequence of changes in everyday consumer patterns. Rather, the city's transformations stem from the co-constitution of all three forces. In Baghdad, violence, property and consumption are inextricably linked. Their enmeshment has in turn spawned social-spatial transformations benefitting the political-economic interests of an elite few at the expense of the urban commons.

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*For more information about the Centre's work on the CRP, please contact Sandra Sfeir ([s.sfeir@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.sfeir@lse.ac.uk)).*



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## Executive Summary

Over the last 18 years, Baghdad has gone through transformations at breakneck speed. Many of these changes have been driven by war and insecurity brought about by the US- and UK-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. During and after the occupation, attention on the city and the country has at various turns focused on foreign troop presence; the civil war; local militias; car bombs; and the fight against Da'ish. This working paper takes a broader approach while also zooming in on concrete urban changes. It considers social-spatial transformations in Baghdad with a focus on two of the city's most important economic, entertainment and consumer districts: Karada on the east side of Baghdad, and Mansour on the west. Focusing on these two hubs helps to reveal entanglements between violence, property and consumption.

This paper aims to illuminate how changes in social-spatial life across Baghdad are grounded in political-economic logics through which elites in control of state institutions and parastatal armed entities politically and financially benefit. This study is primarily grounded in ethnographic research carried out in Baghdad from May through July 2019, including more than 45 interviews conducted with engineers, bureaucrats, urban planners, activists, politicians, and security personnel, among others. Violence, privatisation of property and land, and consumer markets are a collective set of factors and forces that have helped bring about and shape social-spatial transformations in Baghdad. These transformations, facilitated by a political economy serving an elite few, are far more consequential and longer lasting than has been discussed or even acknowledged. This paper thus aims to spur renewed interest in the everyday of Iraq's capital city, and the lives of residents who have endured so much and gained so little.

## ملخص البحث

مرّت بغداد على مدى السنوات الثماني عشرة الماضية بتحوّلات بسرعة هائلة. العديد من هذه التغيّرات كانت مدفوعة بسبب الحرب وانعدام الأمن الذي نتج عن الغزو الذي قاده الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية والمملكة المتحدة البريطانية على العراق في عام ٢٠٠٣. أثناء الاحتلال و بعده كان الاهتمام على المدينة والبلد و في منعطفات مختلفة متركزاً على وجود القوات الأجنبية والحرب الأهلية والمليشيات المحليّة والسيارات المفخخة ومحاربة داعش. تعتمد ورقة العمل الأولية هذه نهجاً واسعاً مع التركيز أيضاً على التغيّرات الحضرية الملموسة. وتأخذ في الاعتبار التحوّلات الاجتماعية المكانية في بغداد مع التركيز على اثنين من أهم المناطق الاقتصادية والترفيهية والاستهلاكية في المدينة: الكرادة على الجانب الشرقي من بغداد، والمنصور في الغرب. يساعد التركيز على هذين المركزين في الكشف عن التداخلات بين العنف والملكية العقارية والاستهلاك.

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى إلقاء الضوء على الكيفية التي تركز بها التغيّرات في الحياة الاجتماعية المكانية في جميع أنحاء بغداد على المنطق السياسي والاقتصادي الذي تستفيد من خلاله النخب المسيطرة على مؤسسات الدولة والكيانات المسلحة شبه الحكومية سياسياً ومالياً. تستند هذه الدراسة بشكل أساسي على بحث وصف الأعراق البشرية (الإثنوغرافي) الذي تم إجراؤه في بغداد من أيار/مايو إلى تموز/يوليو ٢٠١٩ و الذي تضمن أكثر من ٤٥ مقابلة أجريت مع مهندسين وبيروقراطيين ومخططي المدن وناشطين وسياسيين وأفراد أمن و آخرين. العنف وخصخصة الممتلكات والأراضي والأسواق الاستهلاكية هي مجموعة من العوامل والقوى التي ساعدت في إحداث وتشكيل التحوّلات الاجتماعية المكانية في بغداد. هذه التحوّلات التي ييسرها اقتصاد سياسي يخدم نخبة قليلة، هي تحولات مترابطة و طويلة الأمد أكثر بكثير مما تمت مناقشته أو حتى الاعتراف به. وبالتالي تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تحفيز الاهتمام المتجدد بالحياة اليومية للعاصمة العراقية، وحياة السكان الذين تحملوا الكثير ولم يكسبوا سوى القليل.

## Baghdad Transformed

Since 2003, Baghdad has gone through transformations at breakneck speed. Many of these changes have been driven by war and insecurity brought about by the US- and UK-led invasion. During the occupation and after, most domestic and international attention on the city and the country has at various turns focused on foreign troop presence; the civil war; local militias; car bombs; and the fight against Da'ish. Outside observers could thus be forgiven for assuming Baghdad is comprised almost exclusively of violent interactions. They would, nevertheless, be wrong. Violence and insecurity in Baghdad are certainly critical to the city's changes over more than a decade and a half. But they are only part of the story.

This working paper considers social-spatial transformations in Baghdad by zooming in on two of the city's most important economic, entertainment and consumer districts: Karada on the east side of Baghdad, and Mansour on the west. Focusing on these two hubs helps to show the entanglements between violence, property and consumption – and how they often co-constitute. I ultimately aim to illuminate how changes in social-spatial life across Baghdad are grounded in political-economic logics through which elites in control of state institutions and parastatal armed entities politically and financially benefit. My approach in this paper is political-geographic. I spotlight specific sites and places – like a conference hall in Karada and a shopping mall in Mansour – in an effort to make tangible and visible vague and ambiguous terminology, such as 'corruption', which analysts commonly use to write off Iraq and its capital city.

I ground my arguments and reflections in qualitative, ethnographic research carried out in Baghdad over nearly three months, from May through July 2019. I rely on more than 45 interviews I conducted with engineers, bureaucrats, urban planners, activists, politicians, and security personnel, among others. I use pseudonyms for the names of all participants and interlocutors. This research also builds on ethnographic material collected during doctoral fieldwork in Baghdad, between 2017 and 2018. Across three sections of the paper, I respectively consider the impact of violence; privatisation of property and land; and consumer markets, as critical factors that have helped bring about and shape social-spatial transformations in Baghdad. A neat division of these three areas, however, is unsatisfying. Readers will thus find elements of each flagged and indeed impressed within others. Ignoring such enmeshments and complexities would miss what has been created in Baghdad, and how. In other words, violence, property and consumption co-constitute by way of social-spatial transformations, while also being vital to engendering those very same transformations. Each effects and is effected by the other.

This working paper does not claim to be exhaustive. Rather, it is an invitation to look outside and beyond narrow and myopic understandings of Baghdad. The city's social-spatial transformations, facilitated by a political economy serving an elite few, are far more consequential and longer lasting than has been discussed or even acknowledged. This paper thus aims to spur renewed interest in the everyday of Iraq's capital city, and the lives of residents who have endured so much and gained so little.





Map 1: Baghdad, zoomed in to show Mansour and Karada

## Violence as Condition and Conditioning

### Spectacles and Apparitions in Karada

Sidewalks are rarely the most striking features of megacities anywhere. Baghdad in this respect is no different. But perhaps because so much of the city's banal infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed by war and violence, and subsequently neglected or left in disrepair by governing authorities, Karada's sidewalks deserve special mention. Those that run along Inner Karada Street are expansive, even breezy. They facilitate movement through the avenue's tightly packed clothing stores and convenience shops, restaurants and patisseries. The widest portions of the walkways symbolise a clichéd refrain: 'We can finally breathe a little' (*nagdar ntnaffas shwayya*). Baghdadis are prone to utter the phrase during periods of prolonged stability and security, when futures look more hopeful and less precarious. Such expressions can only be understood when placed against a spectrum of violent incidents and events that have at various turns in the twenty-first century come to punctuate and structure lived conditions across Karada and Baghdad.

Karada District simultaneously sits east, south and north of the Tigris River, a social-spatial construction resulting as much from the area's creeping expansion over decades as the meandering nature of the waterway. Its *political* geography, however, is more integral to the area's contemporary history. Karada is a brief drive south from the infamously named Green Zone, over the M'allaq Bridge (literally, 'Suspension Bridge'). Long closed to regular traffic when it became the sole southern entry point into the seat of foreign occupation, the bridge was reopened at the end of 2018 after more than 15 years.<sup>1</sup> Karada's proximity to critical government buildings and its social make-up – considered predominantly Shi'a with a considerable and historic Christian minority – have for years made it an attractive target for militants, insurgents and forces seeking to destabilise Iraqi authorities. But the attack that struck the district five summers ago had a far greater impact on social and political life than the violence before it.

On 3 July 2016, just after 9pm, a small lorry moved through the heart of Inner Karada Street, the area's main consumer artery. The spacious sidewalk that the lorry parked alongside was packed with residents seeking a respite from the summer heat and relaxation after a long day of Ramadan fasting. Minutes later the truck exploded. The massive blast and ensuing blaze engulfed buildings on both sides of the street. More than 325 people were killed; many Karada residents insist that number is merely an estimate, and a low one at that, as it does not include tens of others who were killed, their remains incinerated and never recovered.

'Karada died that night.' Like many others, Manal insisted there was something different about what has since colloquially become known as 'the Disaster' (*al-kaaritha*), when compared to past attacks on and in the area – such as the 2010 storming of and massacre inside Our Lady of Salvation, the Chaldean Catholic church.<sup>2</sup> Part of what made the Disaster different was how it brought about fundamental social-spatial transformations to everyday life in Karada. The Disaster occurred at the end of Ramadan, as families were filling the streets readying themselves for Eid al-Fitr. It pushed authorities to close the thoroughfare to vehicle traffic for months afterward. Cars that were allowed to pass through, consisting largely of residents living in surrounding neighbourhoods, were subject to intense security procedures at the four checkpoints guarding entry into the area. Shop owners on Inner Karada Street insisted that they experienced a roughly 70 percent drop in business overnight. The avenue was no longer home to heavy foot traffic, nor the informal stalls (*bastiyaat*) selling cheap imported clothes and shoes that lower-income residents would shop for (discussed in greater detail below).

If cities have memories, then the Disaster is seared into Baghdad's. 'I lost three friends

<sup>1</sup> The bridge was subsequently closed again during the popular uprising that began on 1 October 2019, during which protesters sought to march on the Green Zone where government ministries, including the prime minister's offices, are located.

<sup>2</sup> The attack on the church was gruesome and shocking. 58 people were killed, to say nothing of its impact on the 'soul' of the city, as one resident mourned. Anthony Shadid, 'Church Attack Seen as Strike at Iraq's Core,' *New York Times*, 1 November 2010. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/02/world/middleeast/02iraq.html> (accessed 18 January 2021).

in the blast,' Jamal, a cafe owner, calmly recalled to me. 'One of them I went to school with. He was celebrating the end of his exams. He was there with his brother who had just gotten engaged. Their father was with them too.' Jamal continued as if he had shared the story a thousand times: 'All three were killed. The mother is alone now.' As a reminder of how singularly crude the incident was, he mentioned as a matter of fact, 'They identified my friend by his keys and part of an ID card. There were no other remains – just bones.'

Alongside the huge number of victims, Manal's comment more than a year after the tragedy was a reflection on the social-spatial life of the district itself. The cumbersome and restrictive security procedures that were implemented following the attack helped to empty out Karada's bustling streets. Out of fear, but also in hopes of avoiding these penetrating security measures, residents' everyday consumption patterns transformed. New security practices, in turn, also brought about concomitant changes to other parts of Iraq's capital city. Karada's disaster was unforgettable because it was spectacular, but also because of the new urban conditions it brought about in the ensuing days and weeks.



Map 2: Karada District in Baghdad





Figure 1: Site of Karada's disaster, rebuilt

Source: Author photo, July 2019.

The security transformations across the district were initiated by Baghdad Operations Command, the state institution responsible for the capital's security. These transformations changed how businesses operated and the ways in which residents consumed and sought out entertainment. Numerous shops shut down; residents from other Baghdadi districts who once frequented its stores and restaurants stayed away. The Disaster seemed like an inflection point in the social-spatial history of Karada. At the same time, however, it is also one node on a spectrum of violent incidents and conditions that have plagued the city for years. These conditions have in the process also *conditioned* everyday spatial imaginaries and mobilities of ordinary Baghdadis.<sup>3</sup> For as much as the Disaster will never be forgotten as a singular tragedy in the contemporary history of Karada and the capital city as a whole, some Baghdadis are already foggy about its particulars – including, curiously, when precisely the blast occurred.

In four separate interviews with Baghdadis, including three from and living in Karada, residents could not recall what year the Disaster occurred, mistakenly suggesting the blast took place in 2015 or 2014. For such a catastrophic attack, these fuzzy recollections are striking, especially when coupled with the longer-term security transformations that the bombing wrought on everyday life. Part of the confusion, I suggest, is grounded in the ubiquity of violence itself – the fact that predominantly Shi'a Karada has for years been a chosen site of spectacular violence by Sunni militants, by way of indiscriminate car bombs

<sup>3</sup> Charles Tripp, 'Theatres of Blood: Performative violence in Iraq,' *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 167–181.

and more targeted attacks on the area's Christian minority. But I also take these brief, seemingly inconsequential moments of misremembering as an invitation to probe how Baghdad's conditions of violence since 2003 have operated less as a series of discrete conjunctures – as much as the Disaster can be considered one. These events should instead be seen as comprising a dynamic continuum of physical precarity that is deeply implicated in social and economic conditioning. In other words, the contemporary history of violence and insecurity across Iraq's capital city has been a constitutive element of social-spatial transformations and political-economic effects that have had lasting impacts on the way Baghdad is experienced, felt and lived.

### Afterlives: Violence with Longevity

'So where are you now?' my friend Eman asks me over the phone. 'I'm just about to leave Karada actually,' I reply, hoping she is up to meet me for lunch. 'God, I haven't been there in years,' she quips back. It is a familiar reflection for someone living in Mansour and other parts of al-Karkh, a colloquial reference to areas of Baghdad falling west of the meandering Tigris River that appears to split the city in two. I hear such geographic musings often among participants, interlocutors and friends casually discussing their everyday social habits and routines. Mahmoud, a shop owner in Ghazi market, a small, *sha'bi* (popular) market also in Mansour, notes something similar. He only goes to the eastern side of the city, al-Risafa, if he needs to pick up goods to sell in his store. 'Some areas,' he insists, 'they are just not safe to be in.'

These circumscribed spatial imaginaries are not surprising. Other cities, particularly in the global south, have similarly been shaped by violence, conditioning residents' ideas of particular urban spaces and their concomitant movements. Writing about post-war Beirut in the 1990s, for example, Aseel Sawalha notes how, in 1996, a taxi driver from east Beirut had become unfamiliar with the western side of the city and was reticent about how safe it was: "I just don't go there! I am just not used to it!" He shrugged and added, "Anyway, I have no reason to be there!" Sawalha writes, recalling her conversation with the driver.<sup>4</sup> In Baghdad, such reasons for cross-city travel were minimised as violence rose in the mid-aughts, and when a civil war – 'the events' (*al-ahdaath*) or 'the sectarianism' (*al-ta'ifiya*), as it is also referred – engulfed the capital in 2006–7.<sup>5</sup> But what also slowly transpired was a hyper-localisation of consumer activity, in which everyday shopping mobilities became spatially limited to residents' home districts and neighbourhoods. New small businesses opened up to ensure residents would not have to travel far for basic necessities like groceries, and tiny pleasures like new clothes. These changed realities were also helped along by a ratcheting up of US-led counterinsurgency operations at the time, a key piece

<sup>4</sup> Aseel Sawalha, *Reconstructing Beirut* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Allam, 'Lessons from a decade reporting on women during the Iraq war,' *Literary Hub*, 6 August 2019. Available at: <https://lithub.com/lessons-from-a-decade-reporting-on-women-during-the-iraq-war/> (accessed 18 January 2021); Anthony Shadid, 'On a Train From Baghdad to Basra, a Trip Back in Time,' *Washington Post*, 1 April 2009. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/31/AR2009033104413\\_4.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/31/AR2009033104413_4.html) (accessed 18 January 2021).

of which was a 'gated communities' strategy that placed tight restrictions on people's movements by way of omnipresent concrete walls and peopled checkpoints. But these (im)mobilities did not constrict everyone equally – then or over the more than decade since.

Since at least 2007, parastatal armed groups have come to be seen as controlling discrete neighbourhoods and districts across Baghdad. The movements of rank-and-file personnel are often not restricted, and in many ways are facilitated by state security practices. Urban checkpoints manned by police and military persist across Baghdad today. But in Karada (and next door Jadriya), powerful parastatal groups – like Badr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq – maintain their headquarters in the area and are offered privileged mobility through checkpoints. Identity cards and vehicle registration documents indicating to which group the personnel belong are shown at checkpoints, if requested, to ensure easy passage. These movements raise a series of questions related to the power of state security institutions relative to parastatal entities, and further problematise references to any coherent and cohesive 'Iraqi state.'<sup>6</sup> My interest here, however, centres on how the political power of these actors is in part *constituted* by their urban presence and spatial control, especially as perceived by ordinary Baghdadis.

Residents frequently noted how parastatal groups were 'in control' (*msaitreen*) of the city's different districts. But there was a fundamental difference between Karada and Mansour, two of Baghdad's most frequented consumer and entertainment spaces (and thus home to valuable real estate). While many residents would point to two or three parastatal groups exercising power in Karada, most balked when queried about parastatal power in the more affluent Mansour, a district in which physical parastatal presence is far less overt if still manifest. Answers among participants varied from puzzled uncertainty to confident insistence that state security institutions, like the Iraqi military, had the upper hand. This latter claim, however, was challenged by Ahmed, a college student and progressive activist born and raised in Mansour. When I put the question to him about who was in control of his home district, he replied without hesitation: 'All of them. They're all in control.' Understanding the power of these groups in a place like Mansour, Ahmed insisted unprompted, requires looking not at mundane mobilities but property acquisition and development – and the political support on which developers depend.

The longevity of violent conjunctures and conditions – their afterlives – is partly grounded in impacts on ordinary movements and mobilities across cities. For many Baghdadis, violence shapes spatial imaginaries and circumscribes where residents choose to go and when. This is indicative of a certain 'anticipation' of violence, and the ways in which people experience not only war and violence but also 'its aftermath.'<sup>7</sup> In this respect, Baghdad points to the ways that violence and everyday life are co-imbricated in the constitution of imaginative geographies that shape, indeed condition, movement in conflict and post-conflict cities.

<sup>6</sup> Omar Sirri, *Scarecrows of the State: Security Checkpoints in Contemporary Baghdad*, doctoral dissertation (University of Toronto, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Sami Hermez, "The War is Going to Ignite:" On the Anticipation of Violence in Lebanon,' *PoLAR* 35, no. 2 (2012): 327–44.



But beyond dynamic and shifting urban mobilities are the more static, arguably more permanent urban architectures, like residential and commercial buildings, that have been erected in the wake of persistent violence and insecurity. Put differently, Baghdad offers a way of seeing how parastatal power, real estate and urban political economy co-constitute through conditions of violence and insecurity. The power of parastatal armed groups across some of the most valuable parts of Baghdad – even when not physically manifest by way of brick-and-mortar urban headquarters – suggests the frontiers of urban transformation are, in fact, in hearts of the city and not always along its hinterlands.<sup>8</sup> Variegated mobilities across the city are thus an entry point into other ways violence and urban transformation intertwine, not through the fleeting nature and function of that violence but through the physical creations left in its wake.

## Forsaking the Public for the Sake of the Property

### From Education to Consumption

Outer Karada Street is often jammed with traffic. As an east-west corridor running through one of Baghdad's busiest districts, it is a key artery for residents, taxis and an assortment of mini-buses (*servees*) whose route destinations end in all different directions. Major regional banks – including those headquartered in Lebanon (Bank Audi) and the UAE (Abu Dhabi Investment Bank) – have their main branches along the avenue. Meanwhile, Baghdadis looking to purchase large home appliances like air conditioners and refrigerators often head to Outer Karada's retailers. Further contributing to the avenue's vehicular crush are SUVs with tinted windows making their way to the only southern entrance into the Green Zone, from M'allaq Bridge. But viewing Outer Karada as exclusively made up of economic interactions and elite mobilities can miss other kinds of everyday social activities that help constitute neighbourhood life, and that also shed light on Baghdad's ongoing political-economic transformations.

Al-Kumait Primary School for Boys is located on Outer Karada's main thoroughfare, just east of Hurriya Square (see Map 2). The school is easy to miss: its simple and nondescript building is nestled within largely commercial commotion. But Karadi families who have resided in the neighbourhood for decades view the school as an important educational institution. Opened in 1972, Al-Kumait has taught the sons of prominent families who have long called the area home.<sup>9</sup> This nearly half-century history contributed to the controversy that erupted around the school in 2017.

<sup>8</sup> For an investigation of peripheral zones as frontiers, see Hiba Bou Akar, 'Contesting Beirut's Frontiers,' *City & Society* 24, no. 2 (2012): 150–72.

<sup>9</sup> 'Madrasat al-Kumait fi al-Karada.. Man Istawla 'Alayha? [Al-Kumait School.. Who Seized It?],' *Al-Masalah*, 13 February 2018. Available at: <https://almasalah.com/ar/news/126855/-الكرادة-في-المدرسة-الكميت-من-استولى-عليها> (accessed 21 January 2021).

Four years ago, students and parents were informed that the school was to be closed. A diasporic Iraqi emerged with documents supporting his claim to ownership of the property on which the school sat. While a judge initially refused to acknowledge the validity of the documents (*sahat sadoor*), the man returned to court a year later, in 2018. The court subsequently recognised the legality of the documents, which reportedly predated the establishment of the school. Students and teachers were given one week to vacate the premises.



Figure 2: Site of Al-Kumait Primary School for Boys, Outer Karada

Source: Author photo, July 2019.

The school's community, along with local education bureaucrats, were outraged. Students and teachers quickly staged protests in front of the school, in the heart of bustling Outer Karada, demanding that it be kept open and questioning both the legality of the closure and the authenticity of the ownership documents the claimant presented.<sup>10</sup> For those in the community, no such property claim – especially on such a valuable piece of land, located on a main transit route – could have been made without the express consent, support and encouragement of an influential political figure.

'I was actually a student there!' a young activist, Jassim, told me when I inquired about the status of the school during an interview. 'So I went and spoke with a former teacher of mine when all of this started. They told me the property once belonged to a prominent family and they wanted it back, and would probably turn it into a mall.'

<sup>10</sup> Mohammed Hamid al-Iraqi, 'Hamlat Madrasatna Beitna Madrasat al-Kumait al-Ibtida'iya l-al-Baneen [Our School is Our Home Campaign: al-Kumait Primary School for Boys],' *YouTube*, 12 February 2018. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_sihWgoP8qo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sihWgoP8qo) (accessed 18 January 2021).

'*Majlis al-a'ala* guys took it – Ammar al-Hakim, Homam Hamoudi,' said Hassan, another resident born and raised in Karada. He was using the abbreviated name of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a Shi'a Islamist political party once led by Ammar al-Hakim<sup>11</sup> who split from his former political home and established the National Wisdom Movement (Al-Hikma). Hamoudi succeeded him as party leader. 'It's been a school since like 1800,' Hassan went on, exaggerating the school's history to make his point. 'My father went to the school and he's 70 years old! And now they want to build a mall [in its place]. That's their work – malls.'

A real estate agent, Sinan, concurred with his fellow Karadis, Jassim and Hassan, that Al-Kumait would likely be turned into a mall. 'It was once the case that you could not bring down a single wall or put one up without a building permit,' he reminisced, bemoaning the absence of law and regulation enforcement. Insisting Baghdad today was vastly different, Sinan raised his left hand and lightly waved it due west. It was an unspoken gesture. A colleague of mine had joined me that day for our interview; when we departed Sinan's office, I asked him what he thought Sinan was alluding to with his silent but charged hand movement. My colleague explained how there was a now-infamous 'yellow building' not far from the office where we had been sitting, on the northeast end of Inner Karada Street. This yellow building was widely known by residents in the area to have been seized by ISCI loyalists.

Before concluding the interview, Sinan returned to the case of Al-Kumait and insisted there was only one way its own seizure could have occurred, let alone so rapidly: 'There are some buildings here that nobody can buy and nobody can sell.' At least, perhaps more accurately, not without the right pedigree. In this case, the Al-Hakim family and ISCI are known to be some of the most influential actors in and around Karada. The party has at least two office branches close to the school – on Abu Nawas Street that runs along the Tigris River, and near Taabiqain Bridge (literally, 'Two-Story Bridge'), which connects Karada to the southern Baghdad district of Dora.

A week after protests erupted in front of the school, the education ministry fell silent. The bureaucrat responsible for the area under which Al-Kumait School fell had for days been giving interviews to local media outlets airing the community's grievances – but then abruptly stopped doing so. Teachers were also forbidden from speaking with journalists about the issue. The school was quickly closed, its students distributed to other institutions nearby.

Zooming in on discrete sites and spaces is not merely about identifying who has benefitted from political-economic transformations across Baghdad since 2003. Much of the story about the beneficiaries of Iraq's new order has most often been told through the country's

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<sup>11</sup> Al-Hakim split from his former political home and established al-Hikma Movement under which he ran in the last federal elections, in May 2018. He maintains, however, strong ties to ISCI (formerly SCIRI), the party formed by his uncle Sayed Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, and that his father, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, also once led.



ethnosectarian political system, called *muhassassa*.<sup>12</sup> At its crux, this system divvies up control of Iraq's ministries among the different political blocs which break down along ethnic and religious lines. This focus on the 'Lebanonisation' of the Iraqi state shows how power sharing is about resource-sharing among political elites. This is a process critical to precluding any kind of popular, consequential and responsive political opposition from forming. In other words, my focus on specific sites and spaces is not meant to suggest that there are specific politicians and elites who benefit from this system far more than others. Rather, highlighting specific land and places herein contributes to an accounting of what might be called actually existing corruption in Baghdad, and the ways in which it contributes to urban transformations with longevity.<sup>13</sup>

### From Consumption to 'Corruption'

In the subdistrict of Jadriya, on the western edge of Outer Karada, sits a large conference hall. Its creamy-beige facade is complemented with off-white stone surrounding its windows and black metal entranceway. The makeshift sign sitting on the sidewalk fronting the hall refers to the building as Al-Abrar Mosque. This site is located on University Street, the thoroughfare that, moving eastwards, turns into Outer Karada Street. Residents of the area remember the site as having previously been a *bustaan* (orchard, or expanse of trees) before being seized by Nouri al-Maliki and his associates in the Islamic Da'wa Party, during his two terms as prime minister from 2006 to 2014. Those I spoke with pointed to the land and building as exemplars of urban transformations facilitated by corruption, which in turn helps constitute elite financial power.

'Just look at the Maliki hall,' Nisrine, a local politician from Karada, insisted to me. 'After 2003, they just took the land and built the hall. I went to its opening celebration. I don't know how many billions of dinars were spent on it. It is filled with empty offices with fake names on their doors. Who was it all built for? I have no clue. But is it serving the people? Of course not.'

Hassan, who we met earlier and whose father attended the Al-Kumait school, flagged the same conference hall unprompted. What spaces or places come to mind, I asked him, that symbolise the relationship between political power and illicit urban transformations? 'That conference hall in Jadriya, next to the German hospital,' he replied quickly. 'They're both Maliki, he took it. It was an open space before, a *bustaan*.' Nisrine also mentioned the German hospital, a private medical institution to be built adjacent to the hall, but that has yet to be completed.

<sup>12</sup> Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, 'Sectarianization and De-sectarianization in the Struggle for Iraq's Political Field,' *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2020): 58–69.

<sup>13</sup> My use of 'corruption' here is admittedly fraught. I do not engage in a ground clearing of the term's merits, or the utility of using the term in reference to state practices in the global south – where western notions of 'good governance' have been used by international financial institutions as a teleological baton with which to prod global south states. But I use the term in part because my interlocutors referenced it, and because it remains a resonant catch-all signalling illicit, illegal, and/or informal deployments of power for financial gain.



Figure 3: 'Maliki' conference hall in Jadriya/Outer Karada

Source: Author photo, July 2019.

Nisrine and Hassan both suggested the land on which this hall-turned-mosque now sits was formerly public, that these elites seized it, and then 'legally' registered land deed titles in the names of loyal supporters. Hassan explained how this process was common among Iraq's new elite. For example, houses once owned by the state and occupied by ministers in the previous regime were snatched up by influential members of the new political class. 'I think Ammar al-Hakim took Tariq Aziz's old home,' Hassan recalled, referring to Saddam Hussein's last foreign minister. 'He is supposed to pay rent to the state, but does he? And if so how much? In fact, houses that once belonged to the state [in and around the area] are now registered in their names, not in the name of the state.'

These ostensibly publically-owned houses fall under what is called *musaataha*, long-term lease arrangements where renters pay annual fees to state institutions. However, Hassan, Nisrene and even Ahmed (who we met in the previous section) all insisted that these fees – if even paid – are nominal, and that such arrangements are tantamount to a huge financial windfall for political elites and their supporters. Ahmed offered another example, of a house in west Baghdad reportedly taken over by Saleh al-Mutlaq, a prominent member of a Sunni bloc of politicians. He insisted that the publicly owned house was taken years ago, and that like other similar properties, the annual rent is 200,000 IQD – roughly 170 USD.

Further interviews with residents and property owners in and around Karada raised the prospect that the land on which sits the 'Maliki hall,' as interlocutors called it, in fact was not originally publically owned. One interlocutor, Abdullah, told me that he was friends with the previous owner who had, in the 1990s, been plagued by efforts by those close to

Saddam Hussein to seize the property in the name of the state. Due to challenges accessing land title documents with municipal authorities, I was unable to verify this claim first-hand. However, if true, it does not so much complicate the assertions made by Nisrine, Hassan and others. Instead, it points to important *continuities* across 2003's moment of conjuncture, both around popular perceptions of who benefits from land seizures, and the means deployed to expropriate properties by those who govern.

Violence and coercion are a leitmotif running through property appropriation by political elites before and after 2003. But also evident simultaneously – as the example of Al-Kumait School illustrates – is the *legalisation* of such efforts, by way of courts, documents and even token annual rents paid to state authorities in an attempt to give a veneer of order to a process that holds up anything but. Finally, such practices of privatisation and land control raise questions about the effects on the Iraqi public as a whole. These oft-observed efforts to control public land for private financial benefit offer a material entry point into how politicians work to evacuate the public they claim to represent. Such processes, as I discuss in the next section, are further complemented by efforts to treat citizens first and foremost as mere consumers.

## When Something Old is Something New: Baghdad's Consumer Markets

### Consuming Citizenship in Mansour

Between 2013 and 2017, three major shopping malls opened less than two kilometres apart. Two of them – Mansour Mall and Babylon Mall – fall inside Mansour proper; Baghdad Mall sits just east of the district's official municipal boundaries, in next door Harthiya. These shopping malls have helped to re-inscribe Mansour's identity as an entertainment district for middle- and upper-class Baghdadis from across the city.<sup>14</sup> Less acknowledged and discussed, however, are the ways in which these consumer developments have helped facilitate a partial shift in economic activity from Karada to Mansour.

In the aftermath of Karada's disaster, at least three shops that once operated in Karada moved their operations to the arcades that help comprise Mansour. Such shifts suggest that violence conditions not only consumption patterns, mobilities and imaginaries, as discussed earlier; physical insecurity also conditions the purveyors of goods and the spatial extensions of economic activity. These market changes have also fuelled ruminations among some residents that elites with economic interests in other parts of the city, like Mansour, have fomented violence and insecurity in Karada. There are sectarian overtones in such insinuations, given that Karada is a predominantly Shi'a district whereas Mansour is home to a considerable Sunni population. This neat break-

<sup>14</sup> Omar Sirri, 'Siting the State: Intersections of Space, Religion, and Political Economy in Baghdad,' in *POMEPS Studies 35: Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq*, Project on Middle East Political Science, October 2019.



down of sect, however, is misleading in part because of class subjectivity – especially in upper-middle class Mansour – which holds equal if not greater analytical purchase.



Map 3: Mansour District in Baghdad

The relationship between urban space and market activity has an extended history in Baghdad, dating back to long before 2003. In the 1980s, Iraqi state authorities built, owned and operated eight central markets across the city, from Hay al-‘Adil in the northwest to Zayouna in the southeast. They were built to facilitate, if also centralise, access to high-quality foreign goods. ‘I still remember going to Mansour’s central market when I was 7 or 8,’ Eman (who we met earlier) told me, recalling an experience from her childhood in the 1980s. Once centres of consumer activity that shared a distinct, profiled architectural flair, the central market buildings met a rather ignominious end. They at first became defunct in the 1990s, closures partially brought about by the withering sanctions imposed on Iraq at the end of the last century.<sup>15</sup> After the 2003 invasion, the US military occupied at least two of these former central markets, using them as Forward Operating Bases.

<sup>15</sup> Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Nadjé al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

While far different from how violent conditions in Karada impacted increased levels of consumer activity in Mansour, this moment of malls-turned-bases again points to the infrastructural imbrications of violence and consumption – and military and market. In this case, the US military occupation of these buildings, once physical manifestations of state-led market interventions, was perhaps fitting symbolism for the new economic order that was to supplant what came before.



Figure 4: Central Market building, Hay al-'Adil

Source: Author photo, July 2019.

In 2011, Iraq's National Investment Commission, an institution established at the height of the US occupation to facilitate the country's neoliberal transformations, put Baghdad's central markets up for private bidding.<sup>16</sup> It was no coincidence that this tender was issued just as the US military was to complete its withdrawal of combat troops at the end of that year. The privatisation of these buildings helped to spur the construction of malls in Mansour. As workers began erecting the new Mansour Mall, the area's old central market building next door sat idle and in disrepair. Part of it was also demolished in order to facilitate easier access to the new mall. Years later, the remainder of the central market building was finally demolished to make way for yet another shopping centre in the area. Khalifa Mall, whose construction is ongoing, will be the fourth major mall to be built in the district in less than eight years.

<sup>16</sup> 'Mashrou' Tarh al-Aswaaq al-Markaziya l-al-Istithmaar [Proposed Plan for Investment in Central Markets], *Al-Sumaria*, 2 June 2011. Available at: <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/42448/-مشروع-طرح-الاسواق-المركزية-للاستثمار> (accessed 18 January 2021).

Interlocutors insisted that the owner of Mansour Mall, the first major shopping centre to have opened in Baghdad after 2003, is a business supporter of and closely tied to the Islamic Da'wa Party and former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. While Maliki's time in power was marked by increasing authoritarian governance, far less discussed is how Baghdad – and other major cities like Basra – experienced rapid privatisation of state-held lands with little public knowledge of any transaction details. Interviewees often lamented that those who most benefitted from these property developments were political-economic elites. Their windfalls came at the expense of investment in and concern with more fundamental public needs around healthcare and education. In 2017, interviewed by a journalist outside Mansour Mall who was asking passers-by about the sell-off of the long-defunct central markets, one woman was acerbic: 'They want to take it for themselves – *halalhom*.<sup>17</sup> The Iraqi people haven't benefitted one bit; how have we? Not a bureaucrat, not a student, none of us. Nobody has benefitted, neither the old nor the young. It all goes into the pockets of the government.'<sup>18</sup> Her use of the word government (*hakouma*) here is intentional, a backhanded takedown of the country's ethnosectarian political system which divides up control of ministries and bureaucracies across purportedly competing parties and coalitions.

The city's new shopping centres put Baghdad in a wider conversation about the rise of malls in the global south. Arlene Dávila tells us that in Latin America, for example, 'shopping malls are being increasingly developed in lower-class neighbourhoods and in closer proximity to groups that never before imagined accessing these spaces and being targeted as potential consumers.'<sup>19</sup> Dávila is interested in both the land and the urban politics that help bring about these new structures, as well as the construction of a nascent-if-still-dynamic middle class in Bogotá. In many ways, Baghdad mirrors Dávila's description of Bogotá – such as by way of 'ongoing processes of class differentiation' in a city with significant inequalities.<sup>20</sup> But in Baghdad, what requires greater emphasis are the ways in which state and parastatal coercion are entangled with land appropriation and concomitant profit extraction across different kinds of consumer spaces.

### 'Transgressive' Streetscapes: On Stalls and Malls

Glitzy shopping malls are not the only sites of consumption in Mansour that symbolise transformed political-economic spaces. Aseel owns a tiny shop in a *sha'bi* market just off of Mansour Street, mere metres away from the area's new malls. She used to operate her shop in an informal market once located where the new malls now sit, serving lower-income residents who were hardest hit during the sanctions regime of the 1990s. In 2002,

<sup>17</sup> I translate her use of this phrase as those who believe they are 'rightfully entitled' to these benefits. More literally, 'to make halal or permissible for themselves.'

<sup>18</sup> 'Binaayat al-Aswaaq al-Markaziya Bayn al-Ihmaal w-al-Fasaad [Central Market Building Between Negligence and Corruption],' *Dijla al-Fadha'iya Channel*, 12 December 2017. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rypMHvE\\_ogk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rypMHvE_ogk) (accessed 18 January 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Arlene Dávila, *El Mall: The Spatial and Class Politics of Shopping Malls in Latin America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 8–9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 15.

state authorities forced her to move for reasons unclear, but that Aseel suggested were related to a property seizure effort. She has since been running her shop out of this second location, which along with other stores serves an economically precarious clientele. Once required to only pay a nominal annual fee to the municipal authorities who administer the public land on which her shop sits, Aseel lamented the 1,000 percent increase in rents she has had to pay in recent years. Insisting the hike is decimating her already-meagre profits, Aseel made a striking accusation: ‘Municipal authorities sent some guys from Asa’ib to collect the new rent from me.’

Referring to one of the country’s most notorious parastatal armed groups, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, she insisted that bureaucrats who ostensibly control the public land on which her shop now sits contracted out the rent collection. Two other owners of shops near Aseel’s confirmed her account of the parastatal rent collection. Aseel’s lamentations once again emphasise the peculiar state-parastatal entanglements that are made tighter and stronger through coercion and land control. They are also an important reminder of the often-neglected class dimension of intricate if still blurry state-parastatal governance mechanisms; residents most negatively affected by such practices of power are those with very little of their own. But my interest in her accusation here centres on the political-economic continuities and discontinuities across markedly different consumer spaces: new shopping malls and old markets.

During the sanctions-stricken 1990s, some Baghdadi residents sought to make ends meet by opening informal street stalls known as *bastiyaat* (sing. *bastiya*). The stalls became most associated with lower-income residents, particularly migrants from rural southern areas seeking work and wages in the capital city. In the aftermath of 2003, these stalls became staple consumer sites in high-traffic areas like Karada; Inner Karada Street’s expansive sidewalks soon became flooded with street sellers, particularly on weekend evenings. Deemed ‘illegal’ by state authorities who had little power or interest in preventing their proliferation, *bastiyaat* are included in a catch-all term used by those in government to refer to ‘transgressions’ of urban space (*tajawuzaat*). The word also includes Baghdad’s omnipresent walls and barriers that block access to public streets and spaces, and that were erected during the city’s worst violence alongside other penetrating security infrastructures like police and military checkpoints.

Referring to street stalls as ‘transgressions’ further stigmatises an already vulnerable class of people seeking sustainable work and affordable goods, and in a place whose governing authorities have been unable or unwilling to address the precarity facing poor people.<sup>21</sup> But in Baghdad, such pejorative terminology also takes on added meaning when coupled with the securitised nature of urban space. Suggesting that street stalls are as undesirable as the concrete blast walls that pockmark the city insinuates that the people who operate and frequent these market spaces are themselves a threat to an idealised version of the city – one that, if it ever existed, did so under very different political conditions.

<sup>21</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for their prompt here.



Such arguments also appear to ignore the fact that years of ubiquitous security architectures, like concrete barriers, actually helped to *facilitate* a proliferation of street stalls. For example, in Mansour's Ghazi market, located roughly a kilometre south of Babylon Mall, these stalls quickly filled the market's streets after concrete walls were erected to prevent vehicles from passing through. These barriers were deemed necessary after the market became a target for militants, such as when its famous gold shops were attacked by gunmen, igniting a deadly firefight between assailants and jewellers.<sup>22</sup> The soldiers who had been stationed at the market's entrance were ultimately unsuccessful deterrents for determined robbers.

In March 2019, Baghdad's mayoralty announced plans to remove the street stalls that were occupying public spaces across the city.<sup>23</sup> Local authorities cited popular dissatisfaction with the presences of these stalls which were implicated in changes to Baghdad's streetscapes, mobilities and consumption patterns.<sup>24</sup> But sellers in Karada and Mansour protested the removal of their makeshift shops, with many insisting it was their only way of making a living. Their protestations had limited impact; through June and July 2019, municipal authorities began removing the sellers (see Figures 5 & 6 overleaf). Intertwined relationships between sites of consumption and architectures of security are ultimately an invitation to further investigate how 'transgressions' are selectively labelled as such, impacting only Baghdad's most vulnerable citizens. Comparing shopping malls with street stalls illuminates seemingly counterintuitive commonalities between the two.

<sup>22</sup> 'Maqtal Tis 'at Ashkhaas fi Sato Musallah 'ala Mahalaat l-al-Mujawharaat fi Baghdad [Nine People Killed in Armed Robbery of Jewellery Stores in Baghdad],' *BBC Arabic*, 17 October 2010. Available at: [https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2010/10/101017\\_nine\\_baghdad\\_gold\\_robbery](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2010/10/101017_nine_baghdad_gold_robbery) (accessed 18 January 2021).

<sup>23</sup> The campaign could be seen as a continuation of the removal of concrete walls and barriers that had begun to take place in earnest a year earlier, in the run up to federal elections in May 2018.

<sup>24</sup> 'Ma 'rakat al-Bastiyaat fi al-Karada.. Ashaabha Nurid Hal wa Amaanat Baghdad: Wajadna al-Badeel [Battle over Stalls in Karada.. Their Owners Want a Solution, Baghdad Mayoralty: We Found an Alternative],' *Al-Mada*, 23 March 2019. Available at: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=217436> (accessed 18 January 2021).



Figures 5 & 6: Before and after removal of informal street stalls, Ghazi market, Mansour  
Source: Author photos, June–July 2019.

The appropriation of public spaces by lower-class purveyors of goods are most often deemed informal, illegal or illicit. Meanwhile, political-economic elites – those tied to political parties and parastatal armed actors – facilitate and make ‘licit’ their own appropriation of public lands. But those latter processes of seizure and appropriation are in key respects no less informal, hardly ordered by ‘any prescribed set of regulations or the law.’<sup>25</sup> Each set of processes manifests as functionally ‘informal’ even if in vastly different forms. And yet, those advanced by elites bring about far more consequential and permanent transformations of urban space, such as through the construction of shopping centres.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, in instances where powerful groups financially benefit from the maintaining of markets for lower-income consumers – like the market that housed Aseel’s shop – these spaces are left to be managed, used to extract further rents.

Baghdad’s new spaces of consumption differ markedly from older and more long-standing ones. Mansour’s shopping malls aim to offer glitz and glamour, experiences of western culture but with hints of local flavour – from what is on offer in their food courts to bazaar-style kiosks in their basements.<sup>27</sup> And yet, put these shiny sites of spending in critical conversation with tiny street sellers across vastly different districts, in both Karada and Mansour, and what becomes evident are common political-economic logics undergirding the management of both types of spaces. Those include the privatisation of public lands so long as the financial windfalls are reaped by, and shared among, the country’s elite class. Like the ‘creative destruction’ proffered by an (in)famous scholar of cities some two decades ago,<sup>28</sup> Baghdad’s destructive creations – including the forced removal of low-income street sellers in the name of cleaner streetscapes – advanced by a coterie of political-economic elites has required turning a wilful blind eye to offensive inequality. In order to sustain this inequality for as long as possible, its beneficiaries seem just as willing to deploy violence against those seeking to create something new, a future more equitable.

<sup>25</sup> Ananya Roy, ‘Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities: Informality, Insurgence and the Idiom of Urbanization,’ *Planning Theory* 8, no. 1 (2009): 80. I am indebted to Majd al-Shihabi for pushing me on this point.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the importance of the ‘licit’ in the construction of capitalism, see: Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Omar Sirri, ‘Seeing the Political in Baghdad’s Shopping Malls,’ *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 9 January 2020. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/09/seeing-the-political-in-baghdads-shopping-malls/> (accessed 18 January 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). For a convincing critique, see Jamie Peck, ‘Struggling with the Creative Class,’ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, no. 4 (2005): 740–70.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I foregrounded entanglements between violence, privatisation of property, and consumer markets that underpin social-spatial transformations in Baghdad. Reflecting on two of the city's most important districts, Karada and Mansour, I sought to zoom in on discrete sites – a school, a conference hall, shopping malls, old markets, street sellers – and the lands on which they sit. Understanding how these transformations have come to be and have reshaped Iraq's most important city means recognising that violence, privatisation and consumption co-constitute. That is to say, each effects and is effected by the other. The point is not a causal one but rather one of enmeshment. The beneficiaries of these entanglements are a set of political-economic elites who have advanced their own localised interests above and beyond the wider Iraqi public. While this paper makes reference to a select few of them, when it comes to elite beneficiaries, the country's ethno-sectarian political system does not discriminate. Each winner has a stake in maintaining the status quo, especially against those seeking to tear it down.

Political protests have occurred consistently across Iraq in the last decade. But the uprising that began in October 2019 was altogether different. Hundreds of thousands of citizens across central and southern Iraq took to the streets demanding the fall of the government and a new political order that no longer privileged identitarian political parties. Met with overwhelming violence from state and parastatal forces, more than 600 protesters were killed and tens of thousands more injured. Despite these attacks, protesters persisted in what they insisted was their revolution. They were ultimately pushed back to their homes by the threat of a global pandemic that their anaemic public health agencies were hardly prepared for. The social-spatial transformations presented in this paper are proof positive of the political-economic conditions revolutionaries in Baghdad and across Iraq are fighting against. Iraq's capital is thus an exemplar of a set of common issues facing residents in urban centres across the country.

A number of critical issues related to urban space and political economy in Iraq remain to be investigated. One of the most significant is normative in nature: the people's right to the city. While metropolises across the global south grapple with a host of similar issues, debates about the right to the city in Baghdad are relatively nascent. In nearby Beirut, for example – a city with devastatingly similar urban dynamics – scholars and activists are increasingly speaking out against established spatial realities brought about by a warped post-conflict urban political economy. In Baghdad, some discussions are being held and progressive views are on offer among a select few academics and urban planners. But while the activist scene across Iraq is arguably today at its most robust, what remains unclear is how those who aim to challenge and reverse the private atomisation of urban life will be successful in doing so.

Discussions around the urban are part and parcel of, and integral to, wider conversations about political-economic change and, indeed, revolution. For what social-spatial dynamics in Baghdad begin to reveal is a political economy of space that offers a financial lifeblood for an unresponsive elite. Activists and protesters continue to demand social and political changes that redirect and redistribute the resources of their country too long siphoned off by so few. Their success is intimately wrapped up in their futures, and in the souls of their cities.





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An aerial view of central Baghdad,

27 September 2013.

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