

The Politics of Infrastructure in the Middle East and North Africa Workshop Report

The Arab Political Science Network (APSN) and the Center for Economic, Legal, and Social Studies and Documentation in Cairo (CEDEJ) organized a workshop on the politics of infrastructure, which was held at the Tahrir Campus of the American University in Cairo on July 1-2, 2024. The workshop was the final event of the joint project that started with a seminar series exploring interdisciplinary political and socio-economic research questions looking at the intersections of infrastructure with war, digitization, energy, transportation, urban expansion and the environment. The seminars ran once a month between January and May 2024.

The workshop built on the seminar series by looking at two dynamics. First, participants reflected on how infrastructure was planned, financed, and built. What are the politics of providing basic services, including transportation, sanitation, and energy — or of withholding them? Second, participants also looked at how infrastructure itself has become a political arena and has been politicized. Infrastructure enabled not only protest and resistance, but also contributed to the emergence of new subjectivities.

Several contributions analyzed the current infrastructural turn in Egypt, and **why build big and quick in a bleak economic context?** In this regard, *Dalia Wahdan* (AUC) questioned the logic of building mega-infrastructure today. She showed that a land-infrastructure-finance nexus, which emerged since 2014, turned infrastructure into a new asset category. *Carl Rommel* (Uppsala University) analyzed ethnographically, a mega-infrastructure, the Adly Mansour Transportation Hub in northeastern Cairo. Thinking about statecraft as stagecraft like he did, helps us understand the emergence of vast, empty infrastructures. This form of “militarized sublime” became one of Cairo’s new paradoxical centers, outside the city and between historic Cairo, massive informal areas, and new cities in the desert. *Aseel Azab-Osman* (Brown University) examined another piece of mega-infrastructure that affords new centralities: the Sixth of October flyover, which bypasses most of historic Cairo and produces several effects and affects, including desires for speed and a view from the bridge that frames the city as a spectacle to escape from. *Youssef El Chazli* (University of Paris-8) and *Neil Ketchley* (University of Oxford) built a dataset to systematically analyze infrastructure provision in the Egypt’s “New Republic.” They showed that public service projects, less advertised than transportation, cost more than transit projects. And that mega-infrastructure, albeit visible and disruptive, was surrounded by a multitude of smaller scale projects, which are more typical of the current politics of infrastructure.

The infrastructural turn in Egypt has a long history, which can be traced, for the contemporary period, back to the 19th century. *Rana Baker* (King’s College London) reconstituted the history of debt-financed land development since the 19th century. British companies colonized Egyptian

land by displacing peasants and creating real estate as a secularized space, detached from morality and ethics. *Amr Khairy Ahmed* (CEDEJ-IFAO) researched the unlikely connection between 19th century industrialization and the growing of trees — mainly acacia and weeping willows — to produce charcoal and gunpowder and make the Egyptian state more robust and independent from Britain. The trees of the Anthropocene are a form of infrastructure, too.

Besides top-down service provision and the spectacle of national grandeur, **can infrastructure also be an expression of contestation and protest?** *Neil Ketchley* (University of Oxford) showed that the 1919 revolution was guided by communication infrastructure, along which revolutionary messages circulated far and wide. But as revolutionaries tended to live closer to security infrastructure, such tactics as speed and focused action were needed to carry on subversive activity. Reconstituting Cairo's security infrastructure in a time of post-war demobilization helps accounting for mobilization and understanding the revolution's initial successes. *Taha Kaleem* (Brandeis University) explored non-normative usages of public infrastructure and digital spaces in Doha and explains how these radically transform what it means to live in an oil state. *Nada El-Kouny* (EUME) analyzed the mobilization of villagers demanding better infrastructure, including a road connecting them to the rest of the country. The absence of road became a symbol of the village's de facto autonomy, and of the need, for its inhabitants, to invent new forms of citizenship and connection. *Nouran El Marsafy* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) looked at informal urban markets in Alexandria as spaces of conflict between grassroots survival and top-down interventions.



What becomes of infrastructure in situations of genocide and war? *Samer Abboud* (Villanova University) explored the forced digitization of Syrian refugees living in the Za'tari camp in Jordan. The data-to-aid nexus points to a radicalization of humanitarian governance and inscribes it in a space where data mining is the norm and serves repressive logic. *Feras Qawasmeh* (Joaan bin Jassim Academy for Defense Studies) studied how the Israeli occupation weaponized water supply against Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank, where Israelis control over 85% of the water resources. *Peter Habib* (Emory University) observed water trucking in Lebanon and the relief infrastructure they provide in a situation of political and economic crisis. *Munqeth Othman Agha* (University of Trento) looked for a logic among the ruins of Syrian cities and created quantitative tools to understand the politics of infrastructure destruction and reconstruction, and the paradoxical linkage between the two. *Shaimaa Magued* (Cairo University) analyzed Turkish reconstruction strategies in Syria.

Finally, **when does the politics of infrastructure blatantly fail to deliver its promises?** *Ansar Jasim* (Freie Universität Berlin) explained that ordinary Iraqis mock the politics of infrastructure as “*takhdir*” or anesthetization of the people, as in Baghdad, where the infamous Sadr City is a symbol of both top-down failure and infrastructure creation from below. *Arda Bilgen* (LSE) showed the “anti-politics machine” of the Turkish techno-state, while attempting to dominate nature and enroll populations through engineering, was still traversed with dynamic processes of politicization and depoliticization. Finally, *Dhouha Djerbi* (Geneva Graduate Institute) evoked the politics of waiting for water in the Tunisian countryside, where environmental crisis and infrastructural failure point to the multiple entanglements between society and ecology, politics and nature.