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- URBAN SPRAWL AND POLITICS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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"Communism, or… the affluent suburbs…?"
Walt Whitman Rostow, 1960[1]

1. Introduction

Saudi cities have sprawled during the past fifty years. Suburbanisation has posed issues of sustainability and equitability: energy and water consumption, housing and transportation costs have soared, increasing class differences and dissolving urban society into smaller, disconnected units. Meanwhile, state institutions have devised few mechanisms of participation: if limited municipal elections have been held since 2005, strong state repression and disenfranchisement of non-citizen populations have ensured the permanence of several rifts, between haves and have-nots, citizens and non-citizens, men and women, urbanites and rural migrants. Pre-sprawl urban governance, characterised by personalised relationships, informality and the density of political and social networks, has been on the wane since the 1970s. Scattered and divided populations are now placed under the heavy surveillance of the state. Organising any form of collective action in these conditions is a challenge.

While Saudi cities were growing and suburbanising, the political opposition to the Al Saud was morphing, too, from unionist, socialist, communist and nationalist groups in the 1950s and 1960s to looser networks of Islamist activists from the 1960s on. How did Islamists organise despite heavy state control, with political parties, unions, independent associations banned and with the state curbing any attempt at public political discourse and mobilisation? Repression did not manifest itself only in bans and state brutality, but also in the geography of the Saudi suburbs. The very spatiality of Saudi society, engineered by the state during the past fifty years, is a structural obstacle to politicisation and activism. How do suburbanites get together, organise and challenge political authority?

This political puzzle is an outcome of the Cold War. After WWII, North American and European development experts advocated for

[1]. Rostow (1991: 2); quoted by Citino (2005/6: 39).

Suggestion from the margin (orange text):

Suburbanization is a Cold War containment strategy. Introduced by Western corporations and experts to accommodate rapid urban growth and support free market solutions, suburbanization became an efficient depoliticization tool.

individual housing in the regions that were crucial to the durability of Western hegemony: the American heartland, Latin America, Western Europe, and the Middle East. Cold War experts worked toward the depoliticisation of urban spaces and imposed top-down development in places where collective action could threaten the status quo (Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995; Menoret, 2014).

Saudi suburbia was created by Cold War experts (Citino, 2005/6), and this fact had serious consequences on collective action. Rather than studying Islamism as an ideology, I examine here what Islamist activists call Islamic action (al-'amal al-islami) in the local and global context of its emergence: the suburbs that were engineered by urban planners, developers and builders to better control society. Shaped by spatial and police repression, Islamist action became in turn the matrix for several types of politicisation. Saudi Arabia, an early US beachhead in the eastern hemisphere, is a central site of this political transformation. In the Saudi fragmented metropolises, new Saudi urbanites were depoliticised and disempowered by suburbanisation. Saudi Islamism is a response to this dislocation.

2. Cold War suburbanisation

The US oil company Aramco started building a California-style suburb for its American employees in Eastern Arabia in the 1940s. The neighbourhood sat on top of Jebel Dhahran, a few miles from the coast. The contrast between this manicured "American Camp" and the squalid conditions of the "Arab Camp" downhill, as well as the minutiae of rules that kept Saudis outside of the white man's paradise, were among the issues that infuriated Saudi oil workers. Beginning in 1945, they organised demonstrations and strikes to protest the oil company's Jim Crow system. They demanded an end to racial segregation and asked for better housing, working conditions and wages. Aramco repeatedly called in the Saudi armed forces to repress them (Mubarak, 1992: 128–130; Vitalis, 2007).

The oil company also launched an ambitious urban renewal programme. In 1947, the governor of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia asked Aramco to draw up plans for the twin cities of al-Khobar and Dammam. Both towns, located between the oil wells and the company's landing pier on the Gulf, had boomed after Saudis, lured by the prospect of oil wages, flocked to the province. Shantytowns around Dhahran were demolished and their inhabitants displaced to large tracts, far away from the gaze of US residents. Suburbia was modern, but also exotic and threatening. Its regular street design emulated US frontier towns and showed little consideration for local urban patterns (Mubarak, 1992: 131–133; Citino, 2005/6).

Aramco created the Home Ownership Program for its Saudi employees in 1951. Employees received free lands in the new developments and were entitled to free construction loans, as long as they built recognisably suburban villas, one story high, set back from the street. The goal was to pull the rug from under the unionists' feet and to discipline Saudi workers by way of loans and red tape. Suburbanisation aimed at preventing conflicts and speeding up oil exports to industrialised countries (Mubarak, 1992: 131–133; Vitalis, 2007).

Suburbanisation reinforced racial segregation. Urban renewal was particularly dramatic in al-Khobar, where the old town was razed to the ground and replaced with a grid of streets. This was a time when US elites viewed home ownership, cheap loans and consumerism as a powerful alternative to communism. Suburbanites living in Northern Virginia and commuting to the suburban campuses of the CIA and the Pentagon conducted US foreign interventions, engineered coups, overthrew regimes and helped create large consumerist economies. French and British colonisers had built cities; the US empire was distinctly suburban (Friedman, 2013).

Aramco's Home Ownership Program turned the varied scenery of the Eastern Province, speckled with ancient towns and palm groves, into a dull landscape of wide roads and single-family houses. Home Ownership did not succeed everywhere, however. Workers hailing from close-knit communities were often reluctant to leave for anonymous single-family villas placed under company surveillance. Wives of Aramco workers were particularly vocal against moving to the suburbs, where they would be cut off from social networks, physically isolated in vast, non-pedestrian neighbourhoods, and condemned to stay indoors most of the time. Women saw early on that suburbanisation, instead of bringing about more autonomy, would force them into purely domestic roles. Oil suburbs were a macho space (Citino, 2005/6).

3. Planning against the city

"Aramco's Levittown" was the template for the suburbanisation of Saudi Arabia. The 1941 road and building statute, prepared by the Mecca municipality and later extended to the rest of the country, established clear functional zoning, setback requirements, minimum building and plot surfaces, and maximum building height. Suburbanisation became national policy when state agencies and ministries moved from Jeddah to Riyadh in 1953. The finance ministry designed the suburb of Malaz (or New Riyadh) to house civil servants and their families. Planned in 1957, Malaz was made of more than 750 single-family villas built along a grid of perpendicular streets, and set new standards for subsequent developments. Single-family two-story houses built in the middle of their plots, set back from large, straight streets, financed by state loans, and linked to one another and to the city by private transportation became the norm. Saudi suburbia was officially born (Al-Said, 2003).

By 1962, the Al Saud royal family saw in dense cities one of its main enemies. Cities were growing fast: in 1968, rural migrants were 54% of Riyadh's nearly 300,000 inhabitants. Rural Saudis were leaving drought stricken steppes and oases and seeking employment, education and health services in cities. Internal migration worried the royal family at a time when discontent was seething among oil workers, students, the armed forces and even junior princes. Senior Al Saud princes feared that urban density would facilitate political mobilisation, and viewed slum removal and suburbanisation as tools to prevent unrest. King Faisal thought slums were pockets of "unhealthy conditions and unrest," and asked Greek architect and urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis to plan a safer, cleaner and more efficient capital for the country. Doxiadis had been the Marshall Plan's point person for Greece

and had designed cities and developments in Pakistan, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Venezuela and Yugoslavia (Menoret, 2014). He was the travel companion of those US State Department experts who had brought suburbanisation to Latin America, from Colombia to Brazil. Their avowed goal was to combat communism: as the US ambassador to Nicaragua explained in 1958, "if you put a man in a home, you make a little capitalist out of him" (Renner, 2011: 10).

To rein in urban growth, King Faisal first tried to slow down rural migration by fixing nomadic populations to the land through irrigation schemes and agricultural subsidies. But well-connected farmers monopolised subsidies, and irrigation projects prompted more departures to the cities, where wages and personal freedom were more plentiful. Following the example of Aramco, the Al Saud then resorted to slum removal and to the deportation of slum dwellers out of the cities, what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2004). Soon after Doxiadis arrived in Riyadh, the municipality asked him to help remove 60,000 slum dwellers (one-fifth of the city's population) and relocate them to the south of the city (Menoret, 2014).

After the 1973 oil boom, suburbanisation overwhelmed the plan. New suburbs sprawled around the city planned by Doxiadis, more than doubling its overall surface. Suburban growth was halted neither by the 1982 master plan nor by the 1989 municipal "Urban Growth Boundary" policy: developers and investors were not deterred by regulations (Mubarak, 2004).

Following the example of Riyadh, most Saudi cities became flat, far-flung, tedious grids of perpendicular avenues organised in superblocks and lined with single-family houses. Everywhere in the country, powerful developers turned empty land around old city cores into sources of quick enrichment. Municipalities had relatively limited resources and could not resist the strategies of well-connected investors. What could they do against Al Saud senior princes actively donating or selling lands? Through their real estate operations, the Al Saud gained the allegiance of investors, developers and builders, and created a new class of wealthy and docile businessmen. Suburbanisation sacrificed urban governance on the altar of capital accumulation. By scattering people across vast subdivisions, it rendered society both weaker and, paradoxically too, less governable. The princes no longer believed in cities: instead of urban planners, they needed more developers, builders and security providers.

4. Suburbs and protest

The transformation of recognisable cities into vast, shapeless urban spaces was most dramatic in parts of the country where political protests had taken place. In November 1979, a Salafi group occupied the Mecca Grand Mosque for two weeks. After the French GIGN crushed the occupation, French experts started planning new suburbs around the holy city (Menoret, 2008). The old cities of Mecca and Medina were progressively razed to the ground between the 1980s and the 2000s, and rebuilt with the help of domestic and international capital. In Mecca, the built environment and the very landscape of the city (hills and valleys) were flattened in preparation for the extension of

Saudi political and economic elites used suburbanization to deport nomads, remove slums, and tie citizens to the state through real estate network and free loans. Meanwhile, they actively repressed any leftist or nationalist opposition.

the Grand Mosque and high rise developments, including the second highest skyscraper in the world, an oversized replica of Big Ben.

Still in November 1979, another protest movement unfolded in the Eastern Province, where Shiite Islamists demonstrated against discrimination and economic marginalisation. Residents used the tight urban spaces of the old walled city of al-Qatif to organise protest and dodge repression. They used a maze of narrow passageways to hide from the police and move from building to building. After the "Intifada of the Eastern Province," the state razed the walled city to the ground, officially to facilitate real estate activity in the area but, more probably, to prevent further activism. The centre of town remained barren until the late 2000s, when it was converted into a huge parking lot. The inhabitants were relocated to the outskirts, and their forced exile opened a new property market to investors. In the 1980s and 1990s, the areas surrounding al-Qatif became suburban subdivisions; palm groves were uprooted and land was reclaimed from the sea. The Portuguese had built a fort on neighbouring Tarut Island in the 16th century; the British had signed there a protectorate with the Al Saud in 1915; Tarut Island was now encased into a glacis of superblocks à la Doxiadis. Suburban developers were marching in the footsteps of imperial soldiers and colonial agents (Jones, 2006; Ghrawi, 2017).

In Riyadh, urban renewal projects in the old city pushed out vulnerable populations and forced them to relocate to the inner city or to the inner suburbs. Cities were hollowed out and disposed of by force, market penetration, or both. Everywhere developers built sprawling suburbs and sold villas to middle class wage earners, whom they expected to behave like responsible homeowners, repay their loans, and live quiet, dull, controlled lives.

Based on a free market celebration of private property and individual transportation, suburban sprawl was meant to deter politicisation: sprawling cities were harder to turn into spaces of contention. Yet it is precisely in the suburbs that Islamist action emerged as a powerful way to protest state power. In Saudi suburbia, extracurricular religious activities in schools, Koranic circles in mosques, and summer camps in schools and mosques became the backbone of Islamist mobilisation. The Islamist movement was first and foremost a students' movement, and developed in the capital's vast suburban expanses.

5. Islamism in Saudi suburbia

The evolution of Islamist action is inseparable from its suburban context and from pervasive repression. By linking individuals to the state's financial institutions, suburbanisation contributed to the dissolution of horizontal links and to their replacement with vertical ties between wage earners and the state. Repression crushed unionism and leftist, nationalist, Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood activism. Yet at the same time, suburban sprawl created new opportunities for collective action. Away from the gaze of the administration and of the police, for instance, vast suburban landscapes became spaces of freedom for joyriders and car drifters. These young men stole cars and organised joyriding and drifting games along the new suburban highways of Riyadh, Dammam and Jeddah (Menoret, 2014).

Islamist activists, for their part, took advantage of the dense networks of schools and mosques built in the 1970s and 1980s in each city superblock. By caring about youth in a time of upheaval, Islamists were meeting middle class fears and aspirations. They organised quietly in the shadow of the state and benefitted from public spending while observing a safe distance from state surveillance. Suburbanisation thus both depoliticised Saudis and created new conditions for political action. Organised around Koran recitation circles, religious extracurricular activities in schools and summer camps, suburban Islamist networks became instrumental sites of political organisation and action.

One institution in particular, the summer camp, epitomised the transformation of suburbs into spaces of contention. In the early 1980s, religious activists started organising summer trips to the southern highlands of 'Asir for youth enrolled in extracurricular religious activities, in particular Koran recitation circles in mosques and Islamic awareness groups in schools. Summer camps were organised across the country, most often in the suburbs of the main cities. They would last from two weeks to two months and were occasions for physical exercise and spiritual guidance. In Riyadh today, summer camps are held in schools and sometimes comprise short trips to the countryside or the mountains (Menoret, 2015).

The newly created, vast Saudi middle class, financed by public wages and state-guaranteed consumption loans, was investing time and money in leisure practices. Holidays and the very notion of "empty time" emerged in public and expert discourse thanks to the generalisation of waged labour, the introduction of regular work schedules, and the spread of urban delinquency, the most visible manifestation of which was the ubiquitous practice of joyriding and drifting (Al-Shithry, 2001). Suburban leisure became an important site of politicisation, as Islamists created programmes that appealed to consumerist sensibilities while providing the sense of community that far flung, scattered neighbourhoods often lacked.

6. A suburban history of summer camps

In Riyadh, religious activists organised summer camps in the shadow of two institutions: the Imam Muhammad bin Sa'ud Islamic University and the Ministry of Education. The Imam University supervised a network of religious high schools (*al-ma'hid al-'ilmiyya*), which had been instrumental in fostering religious activism since the 1960s. Both the university and the Ministry of Education funded summer camps and allowed teachers to organise extracurricular religious activities in schools during summer. Suburban students would gather on a daily basis and participate in sports, cultural and religious activities under the supervision of committed teachers and older students. Lectures and cultural competitions provided them with a repertoire of ideas and actions that were drawn from history, current affairs and literature. Social programmes introduced students to the social skills – in particular public speaking and grassroots organising – that were crucial to the creation and maintenance of activist networks (Menoret, 2015).

Suburbs were ambiguous. They witnessed depoliticization and repression while providing spatial resources for a new type of political activists, the Islamists, whose mobilization centered on suburban mosques and schools.

The intellectual and organisational skills young Islamists honed in suburban religious groups became crucial during periods of crisis. During the 1990 Gulf War, the Koranic circles, religious awareness groups and summer camps provided readymade mobilisation networks to help create committees, disseminate messages, collect signatures and stage protests and marches. After contributing to the early 1990s reform movement, the summer camps were closed by the Ministry of Education in 1995. In 1995, a bombing targeted a US military facility in Riyadh and the Saudi press accused the summer camps of fostering extremism. There was another bombing in 1996, this time of a US Air Force housing facility in al-Khobar, and the public campaign against the summer camps intensified. Yet in 1997, Imam University students officially asked for the summer camps to reopen. Several institutions, including the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY), the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Social Affairs, published studies that showed the camps' social and political worth. One of these studies revealed that youth delinquency dwindled in June and July, when summer camps were in operation, and rose again in August, after the summer camps closed down and before school started. Islamists had long portrayed youth and free time as crucial yet dangerous resources that needed to be carefully harvested and canalised. In 1997, Imam University students and WAMY activists used that very discourse to demand that summer camps be reopened (Menoret, 2015).

Islamist activists replied to this moral panic by explaining that summer camps did not promote violence, but actually prevented idle urban youth from engaging in crime and other violent activities. Despite their diverging opinions, the media and the Islamists shared the same assumptions: they both saw youth as a dangerous force and looked on suburban spaces and free time as potentially ripe with excesses and violence.

In 2005, the Ministry of Education officially renamed the summer camps "summer clubs". The same year, summer camps proved their critics wrong by helping mobilise voters during the first municipal elections in more than forty years. Islamist networks fostered not extremism or terrorism, but suburban electoral politics. Islamist candidates benefited from the experience accumulated by Islamist activists who had become experts at mobilising support, dodging repression and exploiting the peculiar space-time of suburbia, its tedium, empty spaces and empty time. The 2005 municipal elections showed that Islamist summer camps could become spaces of electoral apprenticeship (Menoret, 2009; Menoret, 2015).

7. Space and politics

As migrations to cities increased, creating huge metropolises in a few decades, space became a crucial political resource. Saudi institutions became highly spatialised entities, and the Al Saud ruling family actively commoditised huge swaths of land by selling or granting it to real estate investors and developers. This new spatial order empowered a new social class made of investors, developers and middlemen. It also opened space-times for activities that are considered, in the highly repressive environment of Saudi Arabia, abnormal: car delinquency such

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as joyriding and drifting, political activism, and urban unrest. Thanks to suburbanisation, Saudi citizens increasingly defined their identity in reference to space, consumerism, car ownership and individual housing.

Islamism in Saudi Arabia grew along with suburbanisation, as more and more households left old city centres for the comfort and affordability of single-family homes connected to one another by huge highway systems. Suburban Islamism in turn developed in response to more than fifty years of crackdown on more classical forms of activism. It created the resources for Saudis to organise politically in the absence of such basic assets as political parties, independent associations or trade unions. Looking at the spatiality of Islamist groups provides interesting insights into politicisation in a repressive environment. Most Koran recitation circles are located in the suburbs of Riyadh, and most of their students also live in the suburbs. Summer camps are not only located mostly in the suburbs; they also exploit a suburban space-time made of vast spans of emptiness, and propose concrete ways of acting and organising otherwise idle students.

Urban sprawl redefined the relationship between citizens and the state: it was no longer a relation of personal dependence, but a material and immaterial web made of wages, loans, empty spaces, empty time and a new lifestyle. Geographically separated from the state, households were linked to it through financial institutions and real estate networks. Suburbanisation, in sum, while depoliticising Saudis, also allowed for the formation of social networks that fostered political awareness. Suburban sprawl became a paradoxical site of political protest through Islamist activities in schools, mosques and universities. It also became the theatre of violent encounters between security forces and fringe militants, in particular those who, inspired by Osama bin Laden, turned away from reformist activism. Saudi suburbia was born out of the globalisation of urban expertise and the capital accumulation of the Saudi elites; it became the stage on which new urbanites displayed their economic inclusion and political exclusion. No wonder protest movements originating in Saudi suburbia, this already globalised space, reached distant shores and became, in turn, global.

> Suburbanization, while depoliticizing Saudis, also allowed for the formation of social networks that fostered political awareness and organization. Suburbs became a paradoxical site of protest through Islamist activities and armed militancy.

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