

**Between and Beyond the Country and the City:**  
Basra, Iraq, and Urbanization in the Twentieth-Century Persian Gulf

***I. Research Questions***

How did the Persian Gulf come to be “the core of Middle East capitalism”?<sup>1</sup> If it is clear that today cities like Dubai and Riyadh stitch together a Gulf regional space by ensuring the flow of oil rents through transnational circuits of production, exchange, and finance, it is perhaps more surprising that these were not the bridgeheads of capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> My dissertation project will help excavate this history by studying the port city of Basra and its hinterland between 1914—the onset of British occupation—and the 1970s—just prior to the ruptures of the Iran-Iraq War—so as to understand the changing position of Iraq in the political economy of the contemporary Gulf. Although the historical literature on the Gulf often effaces Iraq altogether, at the beginning of the twentieth century the Ottoman-Iraqi city of Basra occupied a critical position in the economic and imperial networks of this maritime region. We know too little about the multiple transformations of Basra, from a commercial entrepôt characterized by Indian Ocean hybridity to a military outpost of British rule, and eventually to the second city of a postcolonial Iraqi national polity for which its historic export of dates was less important than its accelerating extraction of oil.

I have therefore organized my project around three interrelated research questions: first, what were the social dynamics and political struggles that reshaped urban space in twentieth-century Basra? Second, how did this local process of urbanization reconfigure the larger social

---

<sup>1</sup> Adam Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), vii.

<sup>2</sup> On transnational urban studies of the Gulf, see Alex Boodrookas and Arang Keshavarzian, “The Forever Frontier of Urbanism: Historicizing Persian Gulf Cities,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2018): <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12664>.

and environmental geographies that bound together city, region, and state in Iraq? And finally, how did such changes shape the transnational history and political economy of the modern Gulf? I have not framed these questions in terms of a gradual decline of Basra relative to nearby rivals like Kuwait, because in a system of Gulf cities that remains “integrated, yet differentiated,” even seemingly marginal sites can serve important political-economic functions. For example, although Basra had in the 1920s served as one of multiple politico-legal enclaves of British imperial power in the Gulf, the revolutionary upheavals of Iraqi national politics in the 1950s rendered this status untenable. In the same period, however, Basra emerged as an important hub for Arab leftists waging a transnational anticolonial struggle in the Gulf.<sup>3</sup> A radical urban political culture will be just axis of my investigation; others include the political ecology of port infrastructures, the transformations in rural and urban property regimes, and the national-institutional rescaling of hinterland cash crop industries. I intend to study how transformations in the social, built, and natural environments of Basra—understood not as an abstract, deterritorialized “node,” but as lived urban space—were dialectically related to changes in the multiscale political and economic networks of which the city was a part.

## ***II. Project Scope and Scholarly Intervention***

My project will track back and forth between these questions and scales of analysis, and thereby bridge several distinct historical periods, scholarly literatures, and theoretical approaches. urbanism. I intervene first in the burgeoning historiography of Gulf urbanism, which has developed along roughly two historiographical lines. The first focuses on the region’s ports

---

<sup>3</sup> The regional importance of Basra for anticolonial networks in the Gulf is a recurrent but underdeveloped theme in Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> These social histories have recovered the cosmopolitan hybridity of pre-oil Gulf port cities, thereby challenging narratives of post-oil Gulf history as either *ex nihilo* or defined by the rentier state. However, their focus on the turn of the twentieth century has disconnected the history of such port cities from the processes of imperial transition, state formation, and oil production that occurred from the 1920s onward.<sup>5</sup> These themes are broached more directly by a second body of work on Gulf oil towns in the mid-twentieth century, which examines how oil-fueled development inspired new discourses of urban modernity, subjectivity, and state developmentalism.<sup>6</sup> These works have helped to dismantle longstanding tropes that cast oil modernization as beneficent and frictionless. Nevertheless, the bifurcation within Gulf urban studies between nineteenth-century port towns and twentieth-century oil cities can unintentionally reinforce the popular notion that oil is a *sui generis* sociopolitical agent that marked an absolute rupture in the history of the region.

My focus on twentieth-century Basra would address those analytical and historical lacunae, since it was a port city which developed oil town characteristics after the expansion of the Basrah Petroleum Company in the 1950s. Basra is remarkably absent from a field of Gulf

---

<sup>4</sup> Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005); Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Willem Floor, *The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh: The Distribution Center for the Arabian Coast, 1750-1930* (Washington, DC: Mage, 2010); Farah al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> “From Port Cities to Cities with Ports: Towards a Multiscalar History of Persian Gulf Urbanism in the Twentieth Century,” in *Gateways to the World: Port Cities in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, “Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan’s Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman,” *International Review of Social History* 48 (2003): 361-399; Arbella Bet-Shlimon, “The Politics and Ideology of Urban Development in Iraq’s Oil City: Kirkuk, 1946-58,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33 (2013): 26-40; Pascal Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed*.

urbanism that is generally bewitched by the “success stories” of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and often excises from the modern history of the Gulf those territories that did follow the same developmental path. Scholarship on the historical political economy of Iraq, meanwhile, remains limited by a tradition of methodological nationalism.<sup>7</sup> This has often led scholars to either focus on the high politics of colonial state formation and postwar authoritarian rentier-state consolidation as they played out in Baghdad (made into a synecdoche for the nation); or to ignore the transnational processes through which Iraq as a territorial unit was made. Both approaches take the nation-state category for granted during the very period of its emergence in the Gulf and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Moving outside Baghdad and approaching Basra from the perspective of the Gulf will allow me to rectify both tendencies, by linking the political economy of uneven development within Iraq’s national space to processes ongoing at other territorial scales.

To engage such analysis, I will draw on the insights of critical geography, especially those developed by Marxian urban geographers. While works on Gulf urbanism do frequently invoke Henri Lefebvre, most tend to relate the production of urban space only to rentier-state centralization, instrumental social organization, and high modernist ideology. I will therefore start from the premises articulated by Neil Brenner and others who see urbanization as the

---

<sup>7</sup> See, inter alia, Hana Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Joseph Sassoon, *Economic Policy in Iraq, 1932-1950* (New York: Frank Cass, 1987); Samira Haj, *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963: Capital, Power, and Ideology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997); Kamil Mehdi, *State and Agriculture in Iraq: Modern Development, Stagnation, and the Impact of Oil* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2000); Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State* focuses narrowly on the politics of the 1920s Basrawi separatist movement.

<sup>8</sup> Ironically, it is the presumed artificiality of Iraq as a nation-state that has discouraged theoretically-nuanced studies of its spatial formation. For a critique of this tendency see Sara Pursley, “‘Lines Drawn on an Empty Map’: Iraq’s Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State,” *Jadaliyya*, June 2, 2015. For an alternative approach to nation-state formation, see Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

confluence of processes that are fundamentally multiscalar, such as transnational capitalist development, sociopolitical struggle, productions of cultural difference, and ecological change.<sup>9</sup> These stretch outside the apparent boundaries of “the city” and produce changes at ostensibly discrete territorial levels. So, for instance, when the Basra municipality and Port Authority’s dredging projects accelerated soil degradation and agrarian dispossession on hinterland farms in the 1920s, this altered the social and economic grids in which Basra proper was located. If geographies are to be understood as fluid and uneven processes rather than static territorial units, we should not presume a stark dichotomy between the local, regional, national, and global but see how they are constituted by their relationships with one another.<sup>10</sup>

### ***III. Research Progress and Methodology***

As a second-year doctoral student, I am still planning the dissertation and will not begin intensive research until spring 2020. I have nevertheless been able to conduct significant preliminary research and writing thus far. In a seminar on borderlands history with Sara Pursley, for example, I studied digitized India Office records on the Basra port and learned about the complex political economy of this infrastructure during the Mandate period. British colonial authorities rendered this nominally Iraqi infrastructure a politico-legal enclave of layered sovereignty, with an institutional reach that was extra-territorial and yet subject to British control. My paper, which won the 2018 Graduate Paper Prize from the Association for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies, explained how such policies consolidated British imperial and

---

<sup>9</sup> Neil Brenner, “Introduction: Urban Theory Without an Outside,” in *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, ed. Neil Brenner (Berlin: Jovis, 2014), 15-31. See

<sup>10</sup> This follows a spatial application of Bertell Ollman’s philosophy of internal relations that was developed by a leading political economist of the Gulf. See Adam Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*, 16.

commercial hegemony in the Gulf, but also provoked opposition from rival authorities in this national borderland, such as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and the nascent Pahlavi regime.

The dissertation project will expand upon the theme of informal empire in 1920s Basra, to analyze the simultaneous impact of port infrastructure projects on diasporic mercantile communities, local labor regimes, and hinterland political ecologies. Subsequent chapters of the project will explore other themes that emerge more clearly in later decades, such as the reorientation of Basra toward Baghdad in the 1940s, amid the institutional and material consolidation of Iraqi national space; the political economy of oil-fueled urban development in the 1950s, when Basra “failed” to follow a familiar path of Gulf urbanism; and Basra’s place in transnational radical social movements in the 1960s, as oil city-states elsewhere in the Gulf sought alignment with a postwar US-led regional order.

To pursue these lines of multiscalar analysis, my research will entail several different sites, types of historical source, and research languages. The records of the India Office (IO) are a rich source of material on Basra during the first half of the twentieth century. Day-to-day British imperial policy in the Gulf was crafted from Bombay, and IO officials saw Basra as integral to their regional hegemony. During my research year I plan to spend several months in the United Kingdom at the British National Archives exploring IO records, in addition to the colonial and diplomatic records on the Mandate period. While in the UK I will also visit the archives of British Petroleum, which was central to the political economy of oil extraction in southern Iraq through the 1960s. The archives of international development consultants and urban planners active in postwar Basra (like Max Lock and Partners) contain information about the city’s changing morphology in the 1940s and ‘50s. Finally, for information on Basra’s role in

the region's radical networks in the 1950s and '60s, I will consult the rare left-wing journals, memoirs, and political ephemera housed in the Gulf Collection at the University of Exeter.

I will supplement this research in English-language sources with a visit to India, where national and state archives apparently a number of documents relating to Gulf history that remained in the country after British withdrawal in 1947. There was a significant Indian population in Basra from the period of British occupation, since they were deployed in the colonial administration, but they maintained a presence in the city as migrants and religious pilgrims even in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> How did these cosmopolitan populations in Basra cope with the novel institutional and regulatory functions of the Iraqi nation-state? For example, amid the international tariff and trade control regimes of the interwar period, did diasporic Indian financiers involved in the Basra date trade redirect their capital away from transoceanic commerce into the field of local urban and infrastructural development? Consular and court records in India may help clarify such subjects as they relate to my research questions.

My project will involve a significant number of Arabic and Persian sources. As a borderland city, Basra has been always been a site of movement between Iraq and Iran and I have therefore begun studying Persian. The ability to read relevant periodicals or books on the region accessible outside of Iran will help counteract a tendency to study the Gulf as "either" Arab or Iranian. Drawing on my advanced knowledge of Arabic, I will do extensive research in primary and secondary sources related to Iraq and the Gulf. Although Iraqi historical archives have suffered significantly from decades of war, sanctions, and occupation, sources in Basra could still offer the most complete record of changes in the city's historical political economy.

---

<sup>11</sup> Adill Abdullah Khattab, "Basra City: A Study in Urban Geography" (SOAS, University of London, 1972), 320.

The Basra municipality was exceptionally active in the mid-twentieth century and kept a robust historical record of municipal policies debates—such as those relating to urban property markets and rural migration.<sup>12</sup> Recently published Iraqi scholarship confirms the Basra court records as a source on how agrarian transformations were tied to the political economy of infrastructural development in Basra proper.<sup>13</sup> At the state level, the Iraqi national archives and library in Baghdad are once again accessible to foreign researchers.<sup>14</sup> I therefore hope to spend several months in Iraq, and have begun to reach out to relevant institutions like the University of Basra. I will consult records of state agencies that came to regulate political-economic life in the country (such as the Ministry of Planning); conduct oral interviews with those involved in the southern industries of oil, logistics, and date harvesting; and locate the aforementioned sources in Basra.

If research in Iraq proves unfeasible for logistical reasons, then I will pursue two alternative plans. First, I may instead spend several months in Kuwait, which for geographic and historical reasons is critical to understanding the political economy of Basra. As late as the 1950s, for example, the Kuwaiti ruling family owned vast tracts of date palm gardens in southern Iraq. Circular labor migration and smuggling across the state borders has been also common throughout the twentieth century. The research environment in Kuwait is comparatively easier, and I may find relevant information in local libraries, personal papers, and family archives. The second alternative is to engage in systematic oral interviews with members of the Iraqi diaspora who came from Basra and the south, and to excavate the numerous understudied Iraqi

---

<sup>12</sup> A history of the Basra municipality written by a former mayor cites hundreds of letters of correspondence and official municipal reports. See Rajab Barakat, *Baladiyyat al-Basra, 1869-1981* (Basra: Markaz Dirasat al-Khalij al-‘Arabi, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Talib al-Gharib, *Al-Sulta wa-l-Mujtama‘ wa-l-Ard fi al-Basra Awakhir al-‘Ahd al-‘Uthmani Illa Nihayyat al-Intidab al-Britani: Dirasa Tarikhiyya* (Basra: University of Basra, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Alda Benjamen, “Research at the Iraqi National Library and Archives,” *TAARII Newsletter* (Spring 2012): 13-14.



publications. I have already begun to conduct oral interviews and even confirm some tentative hypotheses on their basis.<sup>15</sup> Local documentary sources, meanwhile, include the Basra Port Authority's annual administrative reports; southern Iraqi periodicals, histories, and memoirs; and the academic journals of the University of Basra's Center for Arab Gulf Studies. The Center frequently published on environmental topics like the water quality of the Shatt al-'Arab estuary, so it will be valuable for the political-ecological component of my project. Finally, I will examine the records of the Baathist state that are housed at the Hoover Institution, since they may contain information on earlier periods of Iraqi history.

---

<sup>15</sup> Personal conversation with former Basra resident Latif Jiji (New York, November 2, 2017). Jiji was born in Basra in 1928 and grew up in a middle-class family of Jewish merchant-landlords, before leaving the city in 1947 to pursue higher education abroad.