URBAN AGE

IT'S ISTANBUL (NOT GLOBALISATION)

Hashim Sarkis, Aga Khan Professor of Landscape Architecture and Urbanism, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University

In July 2008, I could not find a seat on a plane from Beirut to Istanbul. Fearing that I would miss my appointment with Mayor Topbaş, I asked a travel agent to find me alternative routes via Damascus or Amman. She laughed and explained that tourists were flocking to Istanbul from all over the Arab world because of Noor, a highly popular Turkish soap opera, dubbed in Syrian Arabic dialect and broadcast across the Arab world via a Saudi satellite network. Travel agencies were organising guided tours to the villa and to the different neighbourhoods where the series was shot. Some 100,000 Saudis visited Istanbul in 2008, up from 30,000 the year before. Their itinerary included the city's historic monuments, but the Byzantine churches and Ottoman palaces were not the main attraction. The Arab public may have finally rediscovered the capital of an empire that controlled the region for over 500 years, only their focus has been diverted.

The 'Noormania' of 2008 represented more than a fleeting infatuation. The attraction was to the blissful rendition of Istanbul, to a higher level of social tolerance within Islam, to the glitz of a city with 35 billionaires, and to the cosmopolitan lifestyle of a young couple living beyond the confines of their traditional values. Whereas the soap operas of Hollywood, Brazil, and Mexico have already disseminated their own portrayals of glamour and passion to Arab satellite televisions, observers of the 'Noor' phenomenon contend that the Turkish soap opera unfolds too close to home to be dismissed. The love between a young Muslim couple, a woman's career drive supported by her husband, and the possibility of moving from a village in Anatolia to a villa on the Bosporus within the span of one life time captivated about 80 million Arab viewers in the last episode. This also unleashed a negative, visceral reaction from religious leaders who wanted to ban the show.

While social scientists debate the gender, class, and ethnicity impact of the Istanbul-based soap opera on the Arab world, the spatial and geographic terms of this relationship may be worth exploring as well. How could it be possible that Istanbul's pull has not been felt in the Arab world until now, given the physical proximity, the historic connections, and the large overlap between the Arab and Turkish traditions, cuisines, music, and languages?

From Hollywood, the answer would be 'What is the difference?' A video clip of the famous tune 'Istanbul not Constantinople', rendered by the Tiny Tunes animators, conflates stereotypes of Istanbul with those of the Arab world. Deserts and tents form the backdrop of the city's minarets and domes. Lumping everything East of the Marathon planes together, however, is not a new mistake in American popular culture. Orientalist prejudices notwithstanding, cultural similarities are to be expected where there are geographic proximities. In this case, the recent Arab attraction to Istanbul may have more to do with the city's ability to shun off such affinities; it is these evolving geographic relationships which help to explain Istanbul's cosmopolitan profile.

The dynamics underlying Istanbul's exponential growth in the past 20 years have been consistently ascribed to the advent of globalisation. Whether describing the financial and gold markets, the textile and fashion industries, or the construction and real estate enterprises, the city's reach is increasingly beyond the immediate geography of Turkey and the confines of a national territory – Istanbul's economic influence stretches to a second ring of regional, geographic proximities in Central Asia and the Balkans, and also to the world. As is the case with many global cities, Istanbul's economic activities are rooted geographically and historically. For example, the construction industry's link to Central Asia is based on geographic

proximity but also on affinities with reawakened Turkic cultures in former Soviet nations. In globalisation discourse, however, emphasis is placed on transcending these connections and attaining a role, scale and scope that situate the city somewhere outside its immediate geography. In this respect, Istanbul dutifully obliges. As the capital of an empire that ruled over an extended territory, Istanbul illustrates the continuities between empire and global city through its current relationship with its first (national) and second (regional) territorial rings.

In this transition from geographic confines to a regional and then global role, it is significant to recognise which geographies have been suppressed. Istanbul's connections to the Balkans, Central Asia, and Western Europe have all fuelled its ascent to a global city. European standards (and aspirations) guide its transport, infrastructure, and environmental standards. Its urban work force is increasingly Balkan. Yet its location in the Eastern Mediterranean region has largely been ignored. Thus until recently, it would seem that connections to and within the Middle East remain confined to the geopolitical space of the Cold War era. Certainly tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean between Greeks and Turks, Arabs and Israelis, Turks and Armenians, Cypriots and Cypriots, Turks and Arabs, Arabs and Arabs, etc. have hindered free trade and stronger cultural connections between Turkey and the Arab world. Lebanon, for example, has always had good trade relations with Turkey, but until recently prejudices against the Ottoman past and the strong cultural and political presence of Greek Orthodox and Armenian communities have prevented this connection from manifesting a more conspicuous cultural exchange.

Throughout the period of Ottoman rule between 1516 and 1918, Istanbul exerted varying degrees of influence on cities in the Arab world. The models most frequently used to describe this influence are the triad of cities (Istanbul, Cairo and Aleppo) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the network of ports (Istanbul, Izmir, Haifa, Beirut, Thessaloniki and Alexandria) in the nineteenth century. In both models, Istanbul held primacy as a distant first, but was never obsessed with its centrality. In the early-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the relationship between the imperial centre and its provinces tightened compared to the earlier Ottoman nomadic-state apparatus that maintained strategic distance as a means of exercising power. Even when Istanbul controlled the administrative organisation and institutional buildings in sixteenth-century Aleppo, the structure of waqf organisation, or religious holding of land, tended to reflect local practices and elite rule. In the nineteenth century, the discreet train lines connecting the network of ports to Turkey's agricultural hinterlands further reinforced this loose relation between centre and periphery as the train system failed to create a network within the hinterlands. Ethnic groups, merchants and bazaars traded heavily with each other across the Mediterranean in an exchange of goods and ideas, but they held on to their respective hinterlands with loose reins.

A structural shift in the spatial organisation of the Ottoman Empire occurred in the late nineteenth century, particularly after its loss of the Balkans, when Istanbul sought to impose a more centralising presence in the Arab provinces. This translated into heavy investment in agricultural and irrigation reforms, new road networks, and the introduction of railroads, tramways, and waterworks into the major cities of the Eastern Mediterranean. Many of these projects were financed through private concessions to European companies, reflecting each countries' growing interest in the region. Still, the image of the city-empire prevailed over these equalisation efforts. The clock towers and fountains planted in the centres of many Levantine cities have been interpreted as signs of modernisation, while the establishment of decentralised networks of trains and public spaces were seen as signs of the ubiquitous image of the centre, the Sultan of Istanbul. Despite these large investments aimed at equalising the regional territories through modernisation, the disparities between Istanbul and the Eastern Mediterranean remained vast until 1918 when the Ottomans finally withdrew from the region.

The subsequent creation of Arab nation-states, complete with their own exclusionary identities and prejudices, exaggerated their severance from the Ottoman past, and not only because the Arab states equated this past with the Turkish present. The perceived contradiction between Arab nationalism and the rise of Turkish nationalism further widened this cultural rift. Despite recent joint efforts between the governments of some Arab countries and Turkey to

revise the history books, this past continues to be portrayed as a long, dark era. A second point of divergence surrounded Turkey's decision to join the Baghdad Pact's sphere of American influence in the 1950s, while Egypt led the Arab world towards a non-aligned position.

Between the World Wars, Istanbul lost both its ethnic populations to the nascent nation-states around it as well as its political primacy to Ankara. In 1927, the year of the first national census, Istanbul had a population of 690,000 whereas Turkey counted 13 million. That same year, Cairo, the second city of the Ottoman Empire, reached one million and superseded Istanbul. Cairo would continue to rise as the regional political and demographic centre. The independence of the Arab countries after World War II led to a period of rapid urbanisation around their capital cities: Beirut, Baghdad, Kuwait, Amman, and Abu Dhabi all witnessed exponential growth during this period while achieving primacy within their own national territories. Riyadh would have to wait until the mid-1970s to surpass the port city of Jeddah; only Damascus would remain rivalled in its demographic and economic primacy by the regional capital of Aleppo.

When Istanbul again regained its prominence as the centre of industry and trade in Turkey, particularly during the liberalisation period under Prime Minister Adnan Menderes between 1950 and 1960, it set itself on a different path of growth and development than the Arab capitals. Before other cities in the region were feeling the effects of rapid urbanisation, Istanbul was challenged by the need to erect motorways to link its expanding metropolis, the growing 'misery belts' on its periphery, and the stagnation of its inner city. It also went through the processes of urban renewal and building of edge city centres earlier than the others. The historic preservation movement in Istanbul also achieved immense powers in the 1980s, leading to its being listed as a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1985. Significantly, this came six years after Cairo and Damascus gained a similar status, but the scope and depth of preservation policies in Istanbul far exceed that of either. Istanbul has managed to curtail the growth of its informal sector more successfully than other metropolitan centres in the area. Amman, Beirut, Damascus, and even some of the wealthier cities like Jeddah, continue to struggle with the presence of large informal sectors. In 1996, as much as 75 per cent of Cairo's residents lived in informal housing.

Despite the growing rift, the Arab world and Turkey shared some of the planning and design formulas circulated by the Bretton Woods development agencies, the United Nations, and individual experts. For example, in 1938 the French planner Henri Prost, who worked in North Africa on the plans of Fez and Casablanca, is credited with the consolidation of Istanbul's depopulated areas and the introduction of industry inside the city. Similarly, the Swiss architect-planner Ernst Egli, who worked between Ankara and Beirut throughout the 1930s and 1950s, proposed administrative reforms corresponding to the new metropolitan order of these cities.

Perhaps one of the main commonalities between Istanbul and the wider region is in the urban administration of cities with mayors and cities with walis (governors), a challenging and conflicting system that sometimes leads to bizarre reporting structures and to delayed decision making. Since 1984, however, Istanbul has managed to create a metropolitan municipality with an elected and relatively powerful roster of mayors to lead the city. Since then, the city has undertaken urban improvements, including those to increase control over informal development, which could be attributed to a strengthened local government. This is in contrast to most of the Arab cities, where central administrations continue to exercise relatively strong control over the budgetary and administrative responsibilities of their mayors, many of whom continue to be appointed, not elected.

The 1970s marked a significant overture between Turkey and the Arab world: blocked out of the European market, Turkish workers migrated to the Arabian Gulf. Today some 100,000 Turkish workers live in the Middle East, around 95,000 of them in Saudi Arabia, and the numbers continue to grow as Turkish engineers and construction companies move to the Gulf.

The twenty-first century rapprochement between Turkey and the Arab world, which has culminated in the 'Noormania' of 2008, is often attributed to the political ascendency of Turkey's Islamic AKP (Justice and Development Party). Interestingly, this is seen

both as a gesture towards the Islamic world in defiance of continued snubbing by Europe, as well as an expansion of regional markets and economic powers that are strengthening Turkey's bid for membership in the European Union. A clear indicator of such improved relationships is trade. Exchange between Turkey and the Arab world increased from US$ 11 billion in 2002 to US$ 62 billion in 2008. In 2005, a Turkish Arab Economic Forum was established with Istanbul as its permanent base, and in 2006

Turkey was invited to become a permanent guest in the Arab League. Since 2002 Arabs have invested about US$ 30 billion into Turkey, mostly in Istanbul. Beyond trade, political rapprochement has accelerated during the past eight years and Turkey has graduated from nervous neighbour to trusted mediator and peace keeper between Arabs and Israelis. Talks to share electricity and water via under-sea conduits between Turkey and Israel and Turkey and the Arab World have taken this new cooperation to a futuristic level.

It is in this recent period that a particular Turkish brand of large-scale real estate development and project management and construction merged with a finance and development brand from the Gulf. These brands have created a network of exchanges and an unusual margin of excess in the development of these cities. The United Arab Emirates has tried to build towers that bear its name over the precious skyline of the Bosporus. The British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid is designing the new district of Kartal on the southern Asian tip of the city. Most of these projects are private developments sponsored and supported by the city's government. Timothy Mitchell suggests a similar phenomenon of excessive iconic mega-projects in Cairo where projects such as the 1990s 'Dreamland' operate beyond the sphere of governmental fiscal restraints and grow instead from the sale of cheap public land to generate a real estate market and finance public expenditure on infrastructure.

The gentrification and rebuilding of historic centres in Riyadh, Beirut, Aleppo, and now Jeddah and Doha, has reinvigorated interest in Ottoman architectural heritage, but not without transliterations and occasional misinterpretations. The developers of downtown Beirut preserved very few of the Ottoman era buildings but they countered with an overblown Ottomanesque revival style, including a new mega-mosque that dominates the downtown skyline. The restoration of Aleppo fared much better in preserving the Ottoman urban fabric and monuments by linking them to an economic revitalisation project. The destruction of an Ottoman fortress in Mecca in 2002 by Saudi authorities to pave the way for a housing project only serves as a reminder of the deep ideological tensions that remain between the two countries.

The rage against Noor by religious leaders was the latest expression of these tensions and may have led to the collapse of a new niche of tourism in Istanbul. And yet moderation finally prevailed: the flights to Istanbul continued to be full.

I finally found a flight to Istanbul. I met with the Mayor in his summer offices on the Malta Kiosk in the Yıldız Palace gardens, where a member of his foreign relations staff addressed me in perfect Arabic. He and other staff members had studied Arabic in Jordan at the University of Zarqa as part of an exchange programme. The mayor does not speak English, but used his English translator in order to speak to me, an Arab professor from the United States, while I spoke in Arabic to his foreign relations staff.

From the Yıldız Palace gardens, the seat of power in the nineteenth century, endless panoramas open up in front of your eyes, and you can see across the Bosporus deep into the interiors of the city. Some of these interiors resemble edge cities and gated communities to be found elsewhere in the world, including Dubai, Beirut, Cairo, and Riyadh; so far, they have not overwhelmed this city's unique beauty and its ability to seduce. No city in the world exhibits as much face as Istanbul. The expanse and extent of visibility weave a world of their own, inviting and forbidding at the same time.

How insignificant Beirut and Cairo must have been to Abdul Hamid II, the main occupant of Yıldız, against this opera (no soap here) of seduction. How unattractive they still fare in comparison. During our conversation, the mayor repeated after Napoleon that if the world were one country Istanbul would be its capital. Napoleon was no doubt exuding strategy, the mayor pride. I was trying not to be distracted by the beauty of the place and not to make much of the fact that my family name, Sarkis, was the same as the

first name of the Armenian architect, Sarkis Balyan, who designed the Malta kiosk in the nineteenth century. The mayor must have known this, having been in charge of the restoration of the city's palaces in his earlier career. What he did not know was that on the same grounds as we were having tea, Midhat Pasha, my wife's great-great-grandfather, was tried for treason against Abdul Hamid II in 1881. Whether Arabs, Armenians, or Turks, we seem to be perpetually returning to this place to project our renewed desires on its unfolding geographies.

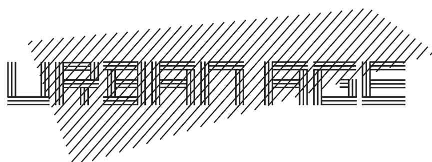
Contact:

Cities Programme
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE

+44 (0)20 7955 7706
urban.age@lse.ac.uk
www.urban-age.net

Alfred Herrhausen Society
Deutsche Bank
Unter den Linden 13/15
10117 Berlin
Germany

T +49 (0)30 3407 4201
ute.weiland@db.com
www.alfred-herrhausen-gesellschaft.de



a worldwide investigation into the future of cities

organised by the London School of Economics and Political Science and the Alfred Herrhausen Society, the International Forum of Deutsche Bank

Alfred Herrhausen Society
The International Forum of Deutsche Bank