

ACRPS Fifth Annual Conference in the Social Sciences and Humanities 2015–16

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is now accepting research proposals for its fifth annual social sciences and humanities conference (2015-16). The themes of this year's conference are:

- 1) The Arab city: Challenges of urbanization
- 2) Freedom in contemporary Arab thought

Papers on these topics will be considered for the annual prize in the social sciences and humanities, which aims to foster critical academic research. For more details on the themes, and more information on the aims of the conference, please see the notes below.

I. The Arab city: Challenges of urbanization

The majority of the Arab world's inhabitants today live in cities, a reality that speaks to the profound and radical transformation of contemporary Arab societies. The move toward urbanization, when compared to earlier socio-historical periods characterized by settled, semi-settled, or nomadic populations in the countryside, is stark. The change in population distribution came about with the emergence of independent states in the Arab world, particularly after the end of World War II (1939-45) and continued until the end of the 1960s when all Arab states had obtained "full" political independence, with the exception of the Palestinian people (who are today the only people deprived of an independent state to represent them).

With the dissolution of European colonial systems and the emergence of independent "geographic" or "national" Arab states, the new regimes –irrespective of their political orientation—adopted interventionist development policies. These affected practices around economic growth, health, education, land use, the formation of armies, and state and security bureaucracies. Interventionist development policies resulted in an absolute and proportional urban population increase, mostly as a result of rapid population growth, declining infant mortality, and rising average life expectancy at birth.

These factors reduced the average age of populations, with a high proportion of youth, and also saw increased rates of family and economic dependency. Providing health, education, food, water, and housing services for such a rapidly expanding population became urgent, and resources were strained. Interventionist state policies had to face new challenges around creating development policies and issues of sustainable development.

These and other factors promoted an unprecedented flow of internal migration from the countryside and semi-desert areas to the cities. The process of urbanization and the expansion of cities –both demographically and physically—accelerated. Population density rose as a result of migration more than as a result of natural population growth, with migration characterized by movement from towns to regional centers, from smaller provinces to larger ones, from less developed regions to regions that attracted development, and from the mountains to the lowlands and cities. Fast outpacing development, this population influx resulted in the proliferation of urban slums, initially at the periphery of urban centers but eventually in their very hearts.

Beyond housing and services for the expanded population, there was a further question of employment. The manufacturing industry, supported by the policies of most of the independent Arab states, was unable to employ the vast numbers of internal migrants. Some were absorbed by the state apparatus, especially the military and security forces, but a large portion were engaged in a rapidly expanding shadow economy or informal employment, which appeared in various guises. This meant the spread of precarious employment at the lower end of the service sector. A clear correlation emerged between the informal sector and the slums, so that living in the slums meant working in the informal sector and vice versa. This spurred what has been termed the dissociation of the city.

In its focus on **The Arab City: Challenges of Urbanization**, conference is concerned with the economic, social, and cultural linkages between the emergence and development of these informal economic sectors and the expansion of slums and illegal settlements located on the urban periphery or in the city centre. . Questions around the theme include: what are the major structural changes that have affected old cities? These may deal with morphology, visual environment, organization, architecture, psycho-cultural aspects arising from globalization, the increased weight of the service sector in urban life, and the impact neo-liberal concepts on development of cities and their reformulation.

While traditional planning took into account social and environmental factors, as well as customs, traditions, and issues of size, there are indications that this legacy has not been translated into modern planning. In fact, planning policies in most Arab states did not preserve the urban and architectural heritage of the Arab cities. Though there have been attempts to salvage some sites, and incorporate others into the service sector, particularly tourism, these have done little to revive or restore city

infrastructure. Within this context, the conference asks: what is the value of history in contemporary proposals for the Arab city?

Some of the literature of modern Arab thought has dealt with the effects of rapid urbanization and its connection to internal migration. Ideas such as the “ruralization of the city” and “urbanization of the countryside” appear in discourses that view migration as a socio-historical process in terms of its impact on political culture and socio-political movements. Modern Arabic Literature and other arts have raised the problem of alienation arising from the migration process. Major questions on the relationship between culture, the city, and urbanization, between the city and civil life, and between culture and urbanism have been posed. There is renewed debate over measuring urban equilibrium. Many theoretical and policy ideas concerning the relationship between cities and development have been considered. Is that relationship based on the revival of medium-sized cities as focal points for development, or on the revival of small and micro cities as part of development corridors? Urbanization has also been explored in terms of material human existence and the qualitative interaction in life. Human urban existence is not a criterion for the urbanity of a city. Rather, human interaction and assimilation into public life with access to rights in terms of suitable decent housing, work to provide an appropriate livelihood, and quality services are features of urban life. These are the qualitative criteria that must be examined and which go beyond material existence in the urban space.

The conference aims to broaden the scope for research in this field, and seeks specialists to contribute to the following sub-themes:

1. The Arab city: socio-economic and demographic change.
2. The place of the Arab city in the conceptual framework of cities with a single center, with two centers, or with multiple centers, and their criteria.
3. Morphological changes to the modern Arab city.
4. Internal migration and models for absorption, particularly in the military and security forces.
5. The role of slums and illegal neighborhoods in the ruralization of cities and the emergence of the dissociated city: (slums and the informal economy; slums and internal migration; slums in lights of indices of human development, human security, and human poverty; the positive side of slums particularly in terms of autonomous solutions, the development of the local community, and creativity in proposing solutions for society at a time when governments fail to solve problems, particularly in the areas of infrastructure and transport).
6. Urban governance and the problem of institutional inertia.
7. The implications of Arab cities being buffeted by the Arab revolutions.

8. The impact of globalization on the Arab city.
9. The modern Arab city and culture: problems of assimilation, alienation, and creativity (models)

II. Freedom in contemporary Arab thought

The question of freedom has been a central concern in modern Arab thought since the beginning of the *Nahda* (Arab revival). Recent reformulations of this question have raised the issue of progress and modernity in modern Arab societies, which is a multi-dimensional concept that subsumes many complex and inter-related issues. The question of freedom in the sense that the conference seeks to explore it first arose in the period of modernism during the Arab enlightenment during the Tanzimat period, when Ottoman Arab society sought to turn the sultanate into a modern constitutional state. Amidst the struggle against colonialism, the question of freedom became mixed with the concept of national freedom. The idea of national freedom is still prevalent when it comes to confronting colonialism that still exists, particularly in the case of the Palestinian people who face continued oppression from a colonial system.

Constitutionalism, with its rationalism, social, democratic, and consultative participation, and concepts of citizenship and rights, represented an axis for thinking about freedom amid a period of transformation. It expressed the response to the challenge of modernity as the challenge of freedom within the state; in the framework of citizenship, political rights, and civic freedoms. In Constantinople, Egypt, Tunisia, and the Levant, the question of freedom was linked to social, political, and institutional constitutionalist movements. The movement for constitutionalism had even spread to Iran by the first decade of the twentieth century. Alongside constitutionalism, there was also the problem of the relationship between the concepts of freedom and democracy. At various historical periods, modern Arab thought fought battles for freedom whose repercussions reached the courts and popular movements.

While there was a consensus over the term 'freedom,' its interpretation was largely linked to the conditions of a specific historical period. Arab ideas about freedom in the framework of the state have remained clouded by a vague vision of the question of democracy. This was particularly the case following the political independence of Arab states, when democracy became linked with the question of citizenship, which came with economic, social, civil, and political rights. Discussion of freedom in this sense linked it with civil liberties. However, new questions have been raised by the development of the understanding of freedom in a different light, which questions the assumed relationship between freedom, democracy and civil/social rights.

Contemporary Arab thought has not overlooked the metaphysical and ontological dimensions to questions of the relationship between freedom and existence. This line of thought—which thrived from

the 1940s-1960s—considers the distinction between the individual and the person, and between the individual and the group. Thinkers of this era explored Berdyaevian and existentialist questions relating to freedom, as well as questions about freedom and commitment, the individual, the meaning of existence, and futility and freedom. These were explored not only on an intellectual level, but also on the level of artistic creativity in visual art, modern poetry, the novel, and dramatic genres.

In recent decades, the effects of neo-liberal paradigms on the relationship between freedom, civil liberties, and political and democratic rights have become apparent. This is particularly the case in many of the modern Arab elites, whose consciousness has shifted from the left to neo-liberalism in the guise of democracy. This in turn has raised questions about the relationship between these models of freedom and democracy, between freedom, development, social justice, and civil society, and between development and freedom. Here, there seems to be a return to the overlapping understanding of civil, social, and economic rights with the right to development. This view understands development as freedom, allowing for an expansion of choices.

In its theme on **Freedom in contemporary Arab** thought, the conference aims to broaden the current approaches on the topic, and to interrogate the phases and their assumptions by asking new questions of the field. It therefore seeks specialists in the following sub-themes:

1. The concept of freedom in the writings of the Arab revival.
2. The relationship between constitutionalism and consultation in *Nahda*-era and ideas of freedom and democracy.
3. Freedom of thought: New views on historic battles, debates, and trials related to the subject of freedom (Francis Marrash and Taha Hussein and pre-Islamic poetry, Ali Abdel Raziq and the caliphate and the foundations of government, Sami al-Kayali and the battles of *al-Hadith* magazine in Aleppo in the 1920s like the polemics between the Hijabis and the Sufouris, the trial of Mahmoud Muhammad Taha and his execution, the trial of Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid, and so on; intellectual-literary-cultural debates like those around the magazines *Shir*, *al-Adab*, *al-Thaqafa al-Wataniya*, and *Hiwar* at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s as an expression of cultural-social-political debates).
4. Freedom and censorship policies on intellectual, creative, and cinematic production.
5. Freedom in Arab intellectual and philosophical production or among particular thinkers (case studies).
6. Freedom and development, equity and social justice: development as freedom.
7. Freedom and national liberation during the battle for independence (case studies).
8. Literature on the fight for independence, nationalist texts building discourses of liberation and freedom.
9. Freedoms in political and rights struggles.

10. Freedom and democracy.
11. Individual freedom, freedom and authority, freedom and responsibility: freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, women's freedom, etc.
12. Is there an Arab liberalism?
13. What is the impact of the liberal/neo-liberal paradigm modern Arab approaches to freedom?

III. Proposal submission guidelines

1. Submit **before June 15, 2015**, a CV, and a 1,000-1,500 word summary of the proposed research, which addresses the following points:
 - a) Conference theme it intends to explore;
 - b) Research thesis;
 - c) Main issues addressed/problematics explored;
 - d) Research method;
 - e) References and sources.
2. Submissions will be assessed by the conference board. Successful applicants will be asked to submit a 6,000-8,000-word paper (inclusive of footnotes and references) by **November 15, 2015**. In some cases conference board members will ask that the research be developed. If an author elects not to proceed with incorporating the feedback, they must indicate this by the same date above.
3. Research papers will be peer-reviewed upon submission. Successful candidates will be notified in a timely manner and invited to attend the annual conference.

Proposals should be emailed to annualconference@dohainstitute.org.