



The Semantics of Violence and Space in Urban History

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2 THE SEMANTICS OF VIOLENCE AND SPACE

Rasmus Christian Elling

DURING THE IRANIAN Green Movement of 2009, the global media were suddenly inundated with pictures and video captured on smartphones and uploaded to YouTube from the streets of Tehran. First, the international audience witnessed the awe-inspiring sight of the streets filling up with the color green, as millions marched in peaceful protest against what they considered the rigging of the 12 June 2009 elections. And then, after the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei announced on 19 June that no more protests would be tolerated, this was taken over by frightening images of black-clad Islamist storm troopers charging on motorbikes, shooting at protesters, and taking control of the streets by brute force. The following day, the image of a young woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, shot to death on a street corner, was imprinted in the minds of millions across the world.

To the Iranian opposition, Neda became an icon of a “surge” (Persian: *mowj*) for “reform” and “change,” while in the Western media, the Green Movement was hailed as a “youth uprising” or “Twitter revolution.” The Iranian state media responded to both representations by demonizing the movement as a foreign-backed “conspiracy” and “sedition” (Persian: *fetneh*). A worldwide audience had thus caught a glimpse of Tehran’s streets as a powerful theater of Middle Eastern politics, of urban life torn apart by the spectacle of violence, and of the conflicting semantics describing contention in the city.

In this volume, historians explore such violence in Middle Eastern cities in the three centuries prior to the rise of social media as a form of global mass communication. This requires an exploration of the intersection between two semantic categories that superficially appear clear-cut and tangible but emerge on closer inspection as ambiguous and elusive: violence and space. In the social context, *violence* is not just about bodily harm, and in the urban setting, *space* designates not only buildings and streets: both categories contain numerous divergent meanings. Violence and space speak in their own languages of power, and power is expressed in the ways we speak about violence and space. “Words

are never ‘only words,’” Slavoj Žižek reminds us: “they matter because they define the contours of what we can do.”¹

Violence as a physical act appears to speak a clear language. Yet the study of violence as a systemic and experiential feature of urban life also requires attention to what is often communicated in distorted or muted registers. The rich vocabularies with which scholars can describe, qualify, and quantify violence are paradoxically contrasted by the general absence in the historical sources of the word *violence* itself (such as Arabic *ʿurf*, Persian *khoshunat*, or Turkish *şiddet*). This absence should perhaps not be surprising: after all, even in English, the word *violence* did not convey all the aspects that the popularized and prevalent idiom does today. This underscores the need for scholars to treat their analytical vocabularies as something distinct from the events and sources being analyzed. Yet, while recognizing that a present-day reading will tease out violence that was perhaps not even considered as such in the historical source, the scholar must nonetheless also draw on the semantic world of the source to make sense of urban violence. Translating the “language of violence” into the language of academic research, in other words, entails both normative and practical questions of interpretation and analysis.

This chapter explores such questions by observing language at work on three interlinked levels. First, violence and space each speak their own languages; second, we use a specific language to talk and write about violence in lay or academic terms; and third, the historical sources employ their own vernacular languages of violence, shaped by cultural, geographical, linguistic, and historical factors that are local in each case. I pursue this discussion by posing a series of methodological questions generated by the case studies presented in this volume.²

READING AND MAPPING THE LANGUAGE OF URBAN VIOLENCE

Violence can arguably be read as discourse. As a form of communication, it always carries meaning that demands interpretation, whether we evaluate it through our subjective, moral, and ethical lens as blind and mindless or as principled and idealistic. This is, of course, especially true of political violence, as David Apter writes: “[D]iscourse as political violence and political violence as discourse constitute disruptive interventions in the taken-for-granted world of causes, effects, and probabilities. It is then that words can kill. In the beginning is the act not the word. But word follows closely behind.”³

The case studies included in this volume deal with disruptive interventions in the social and political text of the city—the moments when conflictual relations

are reconfigured through violence that simultaneously disorders and reorders established social understandings and arrangements.⁴ However, while violence can disrupt dominant structures, as anonymous individuals or marginalized collectives “break through” and enter history in a spectacular manner, it can also constitute or reinforce the structures that oppress and subdue certain groups. Violence is, in other words, constitutive and creative; and in conveying meaningful symbols and choreographed rituals, it is also performative.⁵ For these reasons, each interpretation and retelling of a violent event will itself communicate a message.

Many of the same communicative qualities can be ascribed to *space*, even though its role and presence are often barely implied in historical sources and rarely discussed explicitly in historical research. Indeed, the sheer density and taken-for-grantedness of the places and spaces of the city, in particular, tend to obscure the constitutive role of the daily production of space in conflictual social relations and processes.⁶ A way of reading the language of space, then, is to focus not simply on the violence that disrupts it but also on that which sustains it:

What binds violence and space together is not the discrete events which appear to disturb the spaces we occupy but the more subterranean rhythms that already organize those very spaces. . . . In the end, there is no space without violence, and no violence that is not spatial. Violence is the very structure of space. Each discourse maintains a strategic silence about the particular forms of violence which makes both it and what it appears to address possible. This silence is always a silence about space. The most decisive aspect of space is the one that is never discussed.⁷

Addressing this silence will add further meaning to violence as a positive category of historical analysis, with which to study how contention never just *happens in space* but also *relates to space*. While at first glance some words appear to denote static and defined units of urban geography, they often in fact refer to dynamic sites that generate divergent cultural meanings and facilitate diverse social functions. It is thus important to map the way in which the spatial shapes and intersects with the social at the level of language. Ideally, such semantic maps will reveal forms of power and resistance by drawing attention to the relationship between the ideological, symbolic, and historically contingent aspects of place and social action.

Semantic exercises across linguistic boundaries and temporal distances can reveal differences and similarities between cultural imaginaries. They simultaneously illuminate discursive disparities between the languages used by rulers and ruled, and between those employed by historians and their sources. Writing

about violence in the past tense inevitably encourages the historian to infer meaning from a message that is dislocated by the passage of time and based on fragmentary knowledge that will inevitably be biased in favor of those who had the power to speak and write. The concern with whether sources are representative is obviously an issue for all historians, but it seems particularly problematic when dealing with events that have cost lives, inflicted pain, and caused misery. Historians of the Middle East must rely on accounts that were often authored by tiny ruling elites or foreign powers. Paradoxically, the archives of former colonial and imperial powers prove more bountiful than national archives inside the region, since materials on the post-colonial era are often censored or have been lost or destroyed during dramatic political transitions.

Another obvious methodological problem with studying urban violence in history is that most sources are textual. Important nontextual evidence that plays into the micro-sociology of violence—such as body language, facial expressions, and sounds—is obviously unavailable.⁸ With limited visual documentation at their disposal and no possibility of participant observation, historians cannot easily draw on behavioral, psychological, or anthropological insights. The temporal gulf, not just between source and historian but also between narrator and event, further complicates matters.

In spite of these limitations, the contributors to this volume have employed a wide range of sources, some of which are representative of the alternative or subaltern voices of urban residents, political dissidents, workers, and poets. Written in a variety of languages (from English and French to literary and colloquial Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Persian), these sources were produced by individuals and institutions operating at different scales: the urban, the imperial/colonial/national, and the transnational. Scale, time, and authorship defined the semantic worlds within which violence was related and explained. Authors had one or more national, ethnic, or imperial affiliations: British, French, Dutch, Egyptian, Iraqi, Mamluk, Ottoman, Palestinian, Saudi, Turkmen, and so on. Their voices and vocabularies were shaped by their various roles as chroniclers, historians, spies, activists, community leaders, bureaucrats, and diplomats, as well as by the local, regional, and transnational encounters that defined their social and institutional worlds.

Some of them used traditional, localized, or communal vernaculars, while others employed the official terminology of government or the rhetorical language of modern ideology. Their accounts were delivered in various formats: diaries and autobiographies; chronicles (Arabic: *yawmiyat*) and literature on

“customs and traditions” (Arabic: *adat wa taqalid*); public petitions and reports (Arabic/Ottoman Turkish: *tahrirat*); intelligence, military, and diplomatic correspondence; official inquiries and trial transcripts; newspaper articles; speeches and manifestos; fiction, songs, and poetry.

Given the various factors influencing the genre, language, and style of the sources used in this volume, it is no surprise that often divergent and dissonant semantics are at play. Yet the existence of some commonalities points to particular social processes and mechanisms of contention in space that are shared across the region. These commonalities can be explored by examining vocabularies used to describe violence, its perpetrators, and its victims.

THE SEMANTICS OF DEMONIZATION

A methodological problem is posed by the question of how to read official sources beyond the bias that saturates the language of the ruler and stifles the voices of the ruled. The semantics of demonization that justify the violence of the ruler and vilify the violence of the ruled can be seen as a crystallization of asymmetries in power relations. Sometimes these asymmetries run along racial or ethnic lines. From the “hashish-eating assassins” of Hassan Sabah to the “mad mullahs” of revolutionary Iran, the proverbial “East” has for ages delivered the raw materials for Orientalist stereotypes of the irrational violence of the savage, which has in turn justified the violence of the colonizer as preventive.⁹ Some of these stereotypes were institutionalized in the languages of the colonial apparatuses that ruled large swathes of the Middle East and North Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But the obsessive theme of the *savage*, *bandit*, and *fanatic* that permeates the language of demonization is not limited to the context of colonialism. The long history of conflictual relations in Middle Eastern societies generated a toolkit of imagery to describe an enemy.¹⁰ Moreover, since the late nineteenth century, nationalism, socialism, Islamism, and various homegrown ideologies provided a variety of vocabularies of violence and demonization. These vocabularies framed both state power and resistance to it, as Charles Tripp explains:

For those who inherited the colonial state and then proceeded to claim the exclusive right to rule it, the very languages and practices of power that gave them dominion were eventually turned against them. Idioms that had been used to buttress the power of a restrictive elite were taken up by their opponents and given a very different significance, whilst retaining their potency.¹¹

As in the language of imperial and colonial powers, authoritarian post-colonial regimes branded discontented citizens, subversive elements, and marginalized communities as “internal others,” and thus as enemies. Typically, certain minorities were condemned as *fifth columns*, *traitors*, and *collaborators*, as in the studies in this volume dealing with Jewish communities in Ottoman Tunis (Lafi) and post-colonial Baghdad (Bashkin). Other minorities, such as the rebellious Arabs of Khuzestan (Elling), were implicitly or explicitly castigated as *backward* and *uncivilized*. In many cases, the exercise of violence against such communities was justified and normalized through the semantics of “otherization” and demonization.

These semantics are reproduced in accounts of violence when negatively laden words are employed to distance the voice of the author from the dreadful shriek of the perpetrator: *animosity*, *bloodshed*, *brutality*, *carnage*, *frenzy*, *hatred*, *outbreak*, and *terror*. Similarly, violent actors are depicted as *belligerents*, *evil-doers*, *hostile*, *notorious*, and *vandals*, and their acts as *barbaric*, *bloodthirsty*, *cold-blooded*, *fierce*, *flagrant*, *horrific*, or *vicious*. Indeed, their actions are sometimes described in gruesome graphic detail: they *beat*, *behead*, *lynch*, *rape*, and *stab* their victims. Violent subjects are inevitably depicted as irrational, whether the violence is reported by a French consular employee in Ottoman Tunis (Lafi), a British oil company manager in post-World War II Abadan (Elling), or the president of Iraq addressing the press and the nation after the 1959 disturbances in Kirkuk (Fuccaro). Violent subalterns are also dismissed by the presentation of them and their actions as rooted in individual pathology and social delinquency: *criminal*, *drunken*, *disorderly*, *drifters*, *hooligans*, *obstinate*, *rude*, *unemployed*. In such cases, the discrepancy between the semantics of the source and the scholar is crucial. What scholars call a “conflict” is often described as a “brawl” in the sources, while a “protest” appears as “lawlessness,” a “riot” as “looting and plunder,” “slogans” as “swearing,” or an “uprising” as a “disruption of order.”

The semantics of demonization obviously reduce a complex social conflict to a simple binary opposition and obscure the underlying grievances that motivate the violence.¹² An onslaught of negative descriptors in the sources poses a challenge to the historian, even when circumstantial evidence supports the claim that horrific violence did in fact occur. However, even more challenging than a dismissal of blatant bias is the attempt to draw meaning out of it, usually by teasing out additional information that can throw light on missing voices and aspects of the violent event—not in order to explain the root causes of the violence but rather to understand why they have been left out of the original account.

THE SEMANTICS OF PROFESSIONAL VIOLENCE

The profile and role of professional practitioners of violence in Middle Eastern cities varied significantly in different historical periods. The mapping of professional violence—that is, the violence perpetrated by those in charge of maintaining order—sheds light not only on the increasing state monopolization of the use of violence but also on questions of urban norms and legitimacy (Baldwin, Freitag, and Banko).

In the medieval and early modern eras, military and paramilitary groups—even Ottoman imperial troops such as the Janissaries—were usually aligned with one of a variety of urban elite factions. Those who carried weapons inside the city were often described in generic terms: *armed (men)* or *armies* (Arabic: *jund*), and *bodyguards* or *armed retainers* (Arabic, pl.: *khawiyin*). Some worked as *mercenaries*; others were drafted in lieu of tax as *levies* in times of war or unrest. A particularly prominent role was played by local nonstate actors whom scholars often refer to as *strongmen* (Arabic: *futuwwa* or *qabadayat*; Persian: *luti*) but sometimes simply “young men” (Arabic: *shabab*; Persian: *javanmard*). In some cases well into the twentieth century, these actors were connected to particular neighborhoods and had distinct corporate identities and moral codes. When they appear in the sources as elements of disorder in urban life, they are often labeled as “riff-raff” (Arabic/Persian: *owbash*) or “outlaw” (Arabic: *‘ayyar*). Sometimes, the *futuwwa* used the occasion of public ceremonies and festivals to fight out inter-quarter rivalries, as in nineteenth-century Jeddah (Freitag). But the role of the violent practitioner was not only confined to inter-quarter, inter-elite, or inter-ethnic rivalries but often transcended the city—as in the case of the military elites of eighteenth-century Cairo, who partook in the factional politics of the Ottoman governor (Baldwin).

As imperial reforms, modernization, and colonialism allowed states increasingly to monopolize violence in Middle Eastern cities, new organized forms of professional violence emerged.¹³ Disciplined colonial and post-colonial armies and police forces, and the increasing bureaucratization of public order, established new vocabularies that not only identified new categories of violent practitioners but also legitimized the rulers’ use of arbitrary force against the ruled. An example from this vocabulary is the French *razzia*, or “mobile column attack.” As Benjamin Brower pointed out in his innovative research on colonial violence in Algeria,¹⁴ the Arabic *ghazw* (raid) moved first into the written language of Orientalism and then into French military vernacular after the conquest of Algiers in 1830. From denoting the savage behavior of the enemy, the

term came to identify a particular technique employed by the French army itself. Brower argues that the appropriation of an Arabic word made it seem “as if it was an Algerian or African way of making war.” Moral blame for the violence was thus shifted onto the victims themselves.¹⁵

In the sense of “police raid,” *razzia* is today part of the globalized technical vocabulary of modern disciplinary and military systems. In this terminology, adversaries are often described as *agitators*, *belligerents*, *combatants*, *guerrillas*, *insurgents*, *rebels*, *ringleaders*, or *terrorists*.¹⁶ Discontent, resistance, and opposition are routinely clothed in the mystifying language of *conspiracy*, *disorder*, *infiltration*, *rumor*, and *subversion*.¹⁷ The Order in Council issued by the British Mandatory government in 1933 after the outbreak of riots in Jaffa, for example, turned Palestinian *civilians*, in the administrative vernacular, into *enemies*, and *protesters* into *rioters*. This semantic shift reflected a tactical shift and further legitimized a military crackdown on the rebellion (Banko). In the twentieth century, this military/disciplinary vocabulary became part of the everyday language of warfare in many urban areas. During the Iran-Iraq War, for instance, the Ba’thist regime, in pursuit of its military operations against Iran, sought to identify, in Basra and its hinterland, not just *deserters* and *saboteurs* but *insurgent populations* (Khoury).

Through such terminology, the modern state transformed resistant or violent subjects into a depersonalized mass of individuals in the tactical theater of warfare or a generic factor in the calculus of a discourse on *national security*.¹⁸ Outbursts of disorder were countered by violent measures, often backed by legal means, and declarations of *crisis*, *emergency*, and *exigency* that profoundly disrupted urban life.¹⁹ In this discourse, the imposition of martial law and the deployment of the army were used to *pacify* troublesome cities through *punitive action*, as in Kirkuk after the disturbances of 1959 (Fuccaro), or to *subjugate* and *tame* workers’ movements in Iran and Saudi Arabia during the age of labor mobilization in the oil sector (Elling and Ghrawi). The expansion of the disciplinary power of the state introduced new forms of professional violence, both symbolic and physical, clouded in the metaphors of modern bureaucracy.

The rationalization of the use of force and institutionalization of urban professional violence that took shape during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflected the processes that shaped the modern nation-state in the Middle East. In analyzing moments of eruption during this age, it is necessary to outline the background on which something was labeled as violence: What constituted a not-violent state, or *normalcy*? Who had the power to label a situation

as abnormal? In some cases, it appears that any situation could constitute an exception—hence the continued existence of regimes today that have declared a permanent state of emergency by invoking external enemies and their conspiracies or by referring to the violent crowd as an internal threat.

THE SEMANTICS OF COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

Since the publication of E. P. Thompson's and George Rudé's classic studies of crowds, scholars have distanced themselves from popular depictions of collective violence as sudden outbursts of irrational anger and of crowds as uncivilized and senseless masses.²⁰ Historians, including those writing on the Middle East, have pointed out the often rational and sensible motivations driving crowds, as well as how incidents of collective action have been instrumentally exploited by ruling powers to clamp down on dissent and institute far-reaching disciplinary measures (Fuccaro).²¹

The contributors to this volume have therefore been particularly attentive to sources that speak of *congregations*, *crowds*, *flocks*, *masses*, *mobs*, and *riots*, since such terms often have negative connotations. On the one hand, there are certainly instances in which there is no “politically correct” way to describe a violent crowd and when one needs to call a spade a spade. On the other hand, however, negative descriptors often work to obscure our understanding of the multiple functions of violence. Acts of collective violence can also be read as means of empowerment, as marginalized groups express their feelings of injustice through violent means. In twentieth-century Kirkuk, for example, looting and the destruction of both lives and property served as a subaltern form of communication. Moreover, the retelling of crowd violence has become integral to public memories of resistance against communal discrimination (Fuccaro). In the urban centers of Palestine in the early 1930s, rioting was instrumental in the articulation of formative discourses on indigenous, as opposed to colonial, citizenship (Banko).

In the Middle East, the history of sectarian and ethnic strife has received a great deal of media and academic attention. Indeed, in the early modern and modern periods, certain notions of loyalty, ancestry, and identity became more sharply bordered, loaded with new political meaning, or infused with modern ideologies. But the way in which the present-day researcher seeks to label and understand the violence generated by such contention is not without consequence. Sources that qualify the violence as *primordial* and actors as *zealots* seem to imply that intercommunal contention is a result of unchanging

identities or is an inherent cultural trait. Thankfully, the essentialist assumptions underlying such terminology have been challenged by a vast literature on ethnicity, nationalism, and sectarianism.

The excessive attention paid to destructive forces in urban life obscures the fact that the city generates creative spaces for cultural multiplicity, new social identities, and political agency. Thus, the case of the popular uprising in 1940s Baghdad explored in this volume shows that, beyond harm and destruction, the disruptive moment of urban violence can also reshuffle loyalties and reinforce solidarity across the fault lines of a city paralyzed by communal violence—merely by virtue of the participants' being neighbors or of the effect of a cosmopolitan, multiethnic notion of national belonging (Bashkin). Thus, while it cannot be denied that communalism framed the violent mobilization of many crowds in the early modern and modern Middle Eastern city, the fact is that cities also created new communities. This is a process that needs to be drawn out from the sources, in spite of their often simplistic and antagonistic portrayal of the events.

There are also instances in which it is difficult to infer what type of crowd dynamic is at play, as the sources describe the violence in a generic fashion—in terms such as *assault*, *battle*, *clash*, *confrontation*, *disturbance*, *quarrel*, *rivalry*, *standoff*, *strife*, *struggle*, and *tension*. These descriptors convey little information on the performance, symbolism, and framing of violent acts. Furthermore, accounts typically differ on the scope of violence exerted by the crowds, as in the case of the 1967 riots in the oil conurbation of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, analyzed in this volume (Ghrawi).

If violence is not blown out of proportion, not blatantly caricatured, or perhaps not even mentioned in the source, it does not mean that it did not take place. Some words seem to hint at threats or actual harm: they belie the ruler's fear of the rage and violence of the anonymous masses of the ruled. Physical, emotional, and verbal violence can be conjured through descriptions of an *atmosphere of anxiety and fear* or of *agitation and hostility*. In the case of Palestine in the 1930s, the British military-colonial jargon referred to discontent as *seething* (Banko), while labor agitation in 1940s Abadan was considered *sedition talk* by British oil company officials (Elling). Other terms communicate the idea of violence—*abuse*, *harassment*, *hurt*, *intimidation*, *violation*. Terms for verbal acts, such as *harangue* and *incite*, may convey violent threats and can be considered *injurious*—that is, their utterance can become a violation, an act of symbolic violence.²²

The question for the scholar becomes, When are historical instances of collective action to be understood as violence? This is as an open-ended question that is pertinent for historians of urban violence. To what degree should collective violence as an analytical category be “read into” a source that is silent or vague about the violent dynamics of an event? To what extent can the historian “read” violence “out of” a source that conveys a caricatured, demonizing description of an event? Some of the same questions pertain to readings of space.

THE SEMANTICS OF SPATIAL VIOLENCE

Studying the historical transformation of cities presents the historian with the task of interpreting violence in relation to spatial practices and transformations, and vice versa. While bringing people together in close proximity and interaction, the city is nonetheless characterized by social, political, and cultural processes that detach and delineate its spaces—city from hinterland, urban from rural, neighborhood from neighborhood, slums from upmarket residential areas, private from public. Yet such norms of demarcation and permanency belie a more promiscuous reality of fluidity and instability. The moments of trespass, violation, dislocation, and contestation over space often narrated by the sources testify that the logic of separation has always been challenged. Again, an attention to the semantics with which the sources describe this challenge can illuminate broader questions of urban life.

Familiar indicators of violated spatial norms are located in the conceptual borderland between threatened violence, actual physical harm inflicted on people, and damage exacted on the built environment or inanimate objects: *block*, *breach*, *confiscate*, *damage*, *demolish*, *intrude*, *occupy*, *ransack*, *roam*, *seize*, *show (of disrespect, strength, power)*. Spatial transgression can work on a variety of levels. As can be seen in the case of intra-elite conflicts in eighteenth-century Cairo (Baldwin), the *invasion* and *appropriation* of an enemy’s private residence can carry both the symbolic importance of ousting the enemy from his stronghold and the practical purpose of giving soldiers access to booty. Even if the enemy was not at home, this violation was considered a victory by the invader and an insult to the defender, especially when the trespass penetrated the gendered space of the *harem*. Battles over private property therefore also reflected contestation over norms regulating urban public life.

The neighborhood or quarter (*hawma*, *hara*, or *mahalla*) figures prominently in the stories of violence narrated in this volume. Its enduring importance in urban contention is reflected in its multiple roles as a spatial unit

and locus of social solidarity and political loyalties—a role that continued in the twentieth century in spite of often dramatic changes in urban morphology. Episodes of public contention often involved the transgression of quarter boundaries (Arabic: *hudud*), gates, or walls. For example, the ransacking of the historical Turkmen quarters defined the dynamics of the 1924 and 1959 disturbances in Kirkuk (Fuccaro). Quarter rivalries could play out in intricate theatrics and ritualized performances of territorial demarcation and masculinity during the *mizmar* dance ceremonies in early modern Jeddah (Freitag).

Yet space is not only the stage set where violence occurs: the dark sides of the city both threaten with violence and must be contained by means of violence. The modernizing and rapidly expanding cities of the twentieth century, in particular, started to display the fault lines that separated the mushrooming spaces of the urban poor, the unemployed masses, and social delinquents from the pristine residential areas that accommodated the sumptuous, exclusive life style of the elites. In the Middle East and North Africa, examples of real and perceived violent spaces range from sites of dislocation, reordering, or confinement, such as *prisons* or *camps*, to sites of lawlessness, informality, and spontaneity, such as the *ghetto*, *shantytown*, or *slum*. Such “forbidden zones” of the city obviously have a long history. But the modern age brought informal housing on a huge scale and in forms that were reflected in the language, such as the Persian *halabi-abad* (tinplate city) or the Arabic *‘ashwaiyat* (haphazard places). Sometimes, only a mere fence or screen kept these squalid areas invisible (Elsheshtawy), but the threat of their violent eruption was never far from the thoughts of those living in the elite areas.

With the far-reaching urban and political transformations of the second half of the twentieth century, spatial violence could sometimes operate on a far wider stage, as state actors engaged in large-scale urban reconfigurations. Beginning in the 1950s, military coups and authoritarian transitions brought tangible change to many cityscapes. The militarization of urban morphology in a city such as Cairo after the Great Fire of 1952 entailed a violent reimagining and replanning of space in both symbolic and functional terms (Elsheshtawy).

Ordinary sites of everyday civil life could suddenly turn into violent spaces. Some chapters in this volume show that some violent encounters occurred in interstitial spaces between the private and the public: in courtyards, on rooftops, in mosques, or in front of shops in the bazaar. At other times, encounters occurred in the square and in the street—spaces that were often monitored by and fully accessible to public authorities. Indeed, some of the case stud-

ies in this volume underscore the role of the *maydan*—the historical plaza of Middle Eastern cities that has gained new salience in the recent upheavals of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Pearl Roundabout in Manama, and Taksim Square in Istanbul.²³ Pitched battles between political factions unfolded in the squares on the outskirts of eighteenth-century Cairo, and the violence spread into the center of the city (Baldwin). In a similar fashion, Kirkuk's inner city was routinely used as a parade ground in which the soldiers of the Iraqi army displayed their military prowess (Fuccaro). Urban sites could also turn into popular memorials commemorating those protesters who had lost their lives in urban clashes, such as the bridges of Baghdad during the 1948 Wathba (Bashkin).

More broadly, as urban space rapidly expanded and urban life diversified in the twentieth century, sites of sociability and conflict moved from the coffeehouses, wooden benches (Arabic: *mirkaz*), and traditional meeting places (Arabic: *shilal* or *madhayif*) to the cafés, clubs, labor unions, and headquarters of political parties. At the same time, boiling discontent and organized dissent were often relocated from the bazaars, suqs, and workshops to the factories, offices, and universities. Targets of public outrage shifted from traditional sites of power, such as the amirate, the citadel (Arabic: *qal'ah*), the Islamic court, and the residence of notables to modern sites of governance, education, infrastructure, communications, and leisure, such as the airport, bus terminal, cinema, college, hotel, municipality, police station, post office, radio station, and so on. While functioning as symbols of progress, these sites have also become targets for anti-imperialist and anti-Western rage. Examples in this volume include the Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo, targeted by violent protesters in 1952 (Elsheshtawy), and the oil company installations in Dhahran that were attacked by rioters in 1967 (Ghrawi). To state authorities in cities across the Middle East, novel or reconfigured public spaces became synonymous with the prospect of violent unrest.

Twentieth-century transformations also brought about new repertoires and semantics of urban contention. *Revolts* and *uprisings* (Arabic: *thawra*; Ottoman Turkish: *isyan*; Persian: *enqelab*) obviously have a long history in the Middle East, but in the twentieth century some of these terms were appropriated by new political and ideological forces that transformed their popular meanings into those of *revolution* in its modern sense. Similarly, *demonstrations* (Arabic: *muhadharat*), *civil disobedience*, and *strikes* were novel additions to the vocabulary of public upheaval; and *resistance* (Arabic: *muqawama*) gained new meanings in neologisms such as the Arabic *intifadah* (Banko). The actors multiplied: the civilian, laborer, shopkeeper, trader, and tribesman were now joined by new

cadres of civil servants, engineers, factory workers, labor unionists, taxi drivers, the unemployed, and university students, generating new crowds voicing new demands in novel languages of protest. As cities became centers of dense networks of political activism, their residents became *activists*, *dissidents*, and *revolutionaries*. These new actors, sites, networks, and organizations were crucial in disseminating modern notions of citizenship, social action, and political resistance—developments that were reflected in the changing vocabularies of urban violence.

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The ambiguity of the categories *violence* and *space* demands a triangular lexical mapping that engages simultaneously with the symbolic language of violence as a social and political phenomenon, with the vernacular and imaginary vocabularies of the sources narrating it, and with the terminology of the historian analyzing it. The historian must be particularly attentive to the limits of textual sources (missing voices, temporal distance, linguistic differences), as well as to their context (the way in which scale, authorship, and historical contingency frame the text) and to hidden factors (discursive disparity, etymological histories, the necessity to “tease out” violence from silent sources).

The aim of such a critical approach to semantics is to deploy violence and space as positive categories of historical analysis. Identifying the archetypal representations of violence—the savage, the internal other, the irrational mob—serves to uncover languages of demonization, and thus of power. Situating the violent practitioners—the violent subject, the violent crowd, the violent forces of the state—in urban space can reveal dynamics of coercion and resistance and expose the way in which violence is always part of a struggle over how to order society. Interrogating value-laden languages of legitimacy or legality, the historian is able to reveal how norms are challenged, reproduced, and changed over time.

Inevitably, the historian must make normative choices that are reflected in his or her analytical language but must strive not to succumb to simplistic binary oppositions (tradition versus modernity, ethnic strife versus cosmopolitan coexistence, conflict versus solidarity) or to overread either continuity or change. In this endeavor, it is important to remember that the three languages of violence—those of the violence itself, of the source describing it, and of the scholar interpreting it—are in constant dialogue and negotiation.