Tormented births: passages to modernity in Europe and the Middle East
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Chapter 3

The Changing Boundaries of Urban Landscapes

Estimates of the nineteenth-early twentieth century population of the various Middle East societies, let alone those concerning urban population, vary wildly from one source to another. Until the late nineteenth century general censuses were not carried, and even when they were, people’s deep mistrust of their authorities made them think that censuses were aimed at drafting the male to forced military conscription, or were a prelude to imposing taxes—both being legitimate reasons to hide facts from the data collectors.

However, one long-term trend since the second half of the nineteenth century Mashreq seems beyond doubt, namely that a moderate growth in the total population of the region was followed by faster rates in the first half of the twentieth century. If the ability to feed increasing numbers—even without a rise in the per capita level of wealth—can be called growth, then that period was the beginning of a long-term expansion in the economies of this region, undoubtedly related in one way or another to the rise of new modes of land exploitation, and the expansion of trade and markets.

An early estimate of Egypt’s population during the Napoleonic campaign (1798) put the number at around 2.5 million (Hamdan 1996: 487). More reliable figures are only available since the 1880s. If these are comparable to the early estimate of 1798, then Egypt witnessed a more than threefold increase in its population when the figure came close to eight millions in 1882 (Owen 1993: 217). But the fast growth was to occur in the following periods. When WWI was coming to a close, Egypt’s population had increased by another five millions in thirty-five years and came close to thirteen millions.

Estimating Iraq’s population seems more problematic. The various population estimates produced by the Ottoman census of 1881-1893, Consular reports and those by M.S. Hassan have been criticized by more recent studies as being “impossibly low” for the period up to WWI (Issawi 1988: 17 fn.). An annual rate of population growth of 1.3 percent is taken as more acceptable for the period 1867-1913. As for Syria, Lebanon and Palestine the estimated population grew from two and half millions in 1878 to four and a half in 1913/1914.

Table – 3.1 –
Estimates of the Population of the Mashreq
1878-1917

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>1878</th>
<th>1895/6</th>
<th>1913/14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grand Syria</td>
<td>2520</td>
<td>3190</td>
<td>4540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq*</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>7930</td>
<td>9734</td>
<td>12751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>1867</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>1919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq **</td>
<td>1280</td>
<td>1726</td>
<td>2848</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Justin McCarthy’s estimates.
** M.S. Hassan’s estimates.
NA = Not Available
Thus if one can consider the above figures reliable, then the whole region witnessed pretty constant and comparable rates of growth. Egypt’s population grew at a rate of 1.45 percent from the late eighteenth century until 1882, and 1.4 and 1.5 percent respectively until 1917, the figures for Grand Syria being 1.4 and 1.2 for the periods 1878-1895/6 and 1895/6-1913/4, while Iraq’s rate of growth stood at 1.3 percent.

Whatever the deficiencies of the population estimates are, one thing is beyond doubt: that the growth of urban population never went hand in hand with that of the total population. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, cities were the scenes of civil wars, earthquakes, epidemics and plagues, and innumerable sieges by bedouin raiders. This, in addition to the familiar problem of statistical deficiencies explains the erratic swings in the estimates of the populations of the major cities of the Mashreq. Yet here too, it seems that Egypt led the way for what will become within half a century a trend in the Asian part of the Arab world: the spectacular (or cancerous) rise in the urban population in the whole region.

Historically, Asia and the Middle East sustained a higher absolute level of urbanization than Europe. The reasons for this seem to lie in the lack of peasant’s security and the existence of centralized state apparatuses that entailed the existence of administrative and military posts in scattered towns over the territories of the state. Rozman made a comparison between the development of urban population and centers between 1500 and 1900 in Japan and China on the one hand and Europe on the other. His conclusion was that it would not be unreasonable to assert that the number of cities with 10,000 or more inhabitants in China and Japan was roughly the same as the number in Europe during the entire period 1500 - 1800. However:

“With a similar number of big cities, East Asia sustained much larger urban populations. Europe’s 12.2 million inhabitants in cities over 10,000 in 1800 were surpassed by East Asia’s 19.2 million a few decades later. At no point between 1500 - 1800, and perhaps at no point after the fall of the Roman Empire, did Europe approach East Asia’s urban population totals.”

Rozman 1990a: 71

As for the Middle East, it seems that urbanization was not only higher than in Europe in absolute terms, but in relative ones too. Issawi observes that “at the beginning of the 19th century the Fertile Crescent- and more particularly Syria- was one of the most urbanized parts of the world” (Issawi 1988: 27). He estimates that in 1800 Egyptian towns with more than 10 thousand inhabitants each comprised 10 percent of the total population (Issawi 1969: 103). Other estimates made by Baer show that towns with more than 20 thousand comprised 8.6 percent of the population in the 1820’s (Baer 1968: 168). Issawi’s estimates for Iraq’s urban population in 1800 are 15 percent, Iran almost 15 percent, Turkey around 10 percent, and Syria around 20 percent. Smilianskaya made yet other estimates by defining a locality of more than 5,000 residents as a town. Thus the total number of urban population at the end of the eighteenth century was 20 percent, those living in towns of more than 10 thousand inhabitants made 13.5 percent of the total population, and towns with more than 20 thousand hosted around 11.4 percent (Smilianskaya 1989: 135-8).

Whichever estimates one decides to rely upon, it is plain that the Middle East surpassed Europe’s rates of urbanization despite the huge gap in the levels of

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1 See page 127 and chapter 6 below, especially table 6.1.
industrial development. Smilianiskaya provides the following comparison regarding town dwellers in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century: Britain and the Netherlands 7 percent in towns with more than 10 thousand, France 2.7 percent, Russia 1.6 percent, Germany 1 percent, the USA (in localities of more than 8 thousand) 3.3 percent (Ibid. 138) Charles Tilly asserts that:

"[T]he proportion [of Europe’s population] living in cities did not rise dramatically until the nineteenth century. According to the best available estimates, the share in places of 10,000 people or more ran at around 5 percent in 990, 6 percent in 1490, 10 percent in 1790, and 30 percent in 1890, as compared with nearly 60 percent today."

Tilly 1990: 50

The limits on urban expansion in Europe have been thoroughly discussed by several authorities (Bairoch 1988, Schwartz 1994, Tilly 1990). These were limits imposed by the agricultural productivity on the one hand, and the non-development of land transport upon which much of the continent relied on the other. Yet even in pre-industrial Europe the phenomenon of cities owing their sheer size to being administrative/military seats of states was not unknown. The size of Berlin at the end of the reign of Fredric II (1786) when the Prussian State took its definitive shape is testimony to this. Berlin had a population of 142,000, 33,000 of whom belonged to the garrison (the military and their families), 13,000 comprised the bureaucratic apparatus, while 22,000 were in the service of the Royal Court, or attached to it. The same holds for Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire whose population reached 277,000 by the death of Joseph II (Balazs and Niederhauser 1985: 64). But in general, the trend towards the rise in urbanization in today’s capitalist countries went hand in hand with the pace of industrialization and the creation of modern structures that could absorb the rise in the urban population on the one hand, and further induce a rise in agricultural productivity on the other. The case in the Middle East (and the third world) was radically different, as we shall see below.

In the Middle East -especially the Nile valley, Iraq and upper Syria- much of the transport was conducted via rivers as well as the sea (notably the trade between Egypt and Syria and long-distance trade between Basra, the Persian Gulf and India). Yet as we have noted earlier, until the mid-eighteenth century in the Asian part of the Middle East, and around half a century before that in Egypt, growth of the urban population seems to have been very erratic. A century-long growth could be wiped out by a plague. Only following the introduction of new sanitary rules and institutions and the extension of effective rule by the state on further away regions could the expansion in urban growth become irreversible. Between 1800 and 1860, Istanbul and Teheran made very modest gains in population numbers, which grew from 400,000 and 50,000 to 500,000 and 70,000 respectively. Yet in the following half-century, both cities grew at much faster rates. On the eve of WWI, Teheran’s population quadrupled to 280,000 and Istanbul’s more than doubled to 1.1 millions (Issawi 1969:

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2As for earlier periods “It was rare for a town to exceed 20000 inhabitants, and in the fourteenth century cities as large as 40-50000 inhabitants were only found in Italy and Flanders. York 11000, Bristol 9500. Fifteenth century Hamburg 22000, Nurnberg 20- 25000. Ulm 20000” (Sombart. Der Moderne Kapitalismus, I: 213-216, cited by Debb 1963: 71 - 72 fn.).
Beirut rose from 10,000 in 1840 to 80,000 in 1880 (Fawaz: 1983: 182). After a significant decline between 1820 and 1860, the population of Damascus regained its gradual increase. In 1885 the population of Damascus was estimated at 150,000 (P. Khoury 1984: 56). Baghdad’s population drastically shrank after the epidemic of 1830-1831. Nawwar estimates that the population dropped from 150,000 to 50,000. Batatu estimates the drop from 80,000 to 27,000 (Nawwar 1968: 32, Batatu 1978: 15). A subsequent rise in its population is beyond doubt, yet the figures relating to the period up to WWI are highly contradictory.

Between 1846 and 1891 Cairo’s population grew from 256,697 to 353,188. Alexandria, a small semi-deserted town of 15,000 in 1800 witnessed the most spectacular growth thanks to digging the al Mahmoudiya Canal, which provided it with drinking water from the Nile, and later the opening of the first railroad in Egypt that linked it with Cairo in 1854. In 1846, Alexandria became the home 164,359 inhabitants, 180,000 in 1865, 230,000 in 1880, and 570,000 in 1925. According to Baer, the greatest increase in Egypt’s urban population during the nineteenth century occurred between 1882—the year of the British occupation—and 1897. In this period total population increased by 23 percent, while that of urbanians increased by 68 percent (Baer 1968: 155, Ilbert 1990:6). However, it is the twentieth-century developments that we are concerned with. And we can easily see that the steady urbanization of the Middle East throughout the twentieth century has dwarfed all previous developments.

According to a 1947 population census, 36.6 percent of Cairo’s population in that year (765,000 of a population of 2.1 million) was not born in it; the respective proportion for Alexandria was 30.6 percent or 281,000 out of a population of 919,000 (el-Saaty 1980: 149). These high figures should not be surprising given that these two cities comprised some 20 percent of Egypt’s population in the mid-century, with a per capita income that was much higher than the rest of the country (El Ghatly 1947: 473). In fact, by 1960 both cities hosted almost 60 percent of all the factories employing ten or more individuals in Egypt with a percentage of more than 49 percent of all those employed in such establishments (el Saaty 1980:88-90). The flux of migrants to Alexandria seems to have intensified during the 1940s and 1950s. Between the censuses of 1937, 1947, and 1960 the city increased in population from 685 thousand to 919 thousand and then to 1.5 million, that is at annual growth rates of 3 percent and 5.2 percent respectively. The respective rates of population growth were 3.4 percent and 4.6 percent. The 1947-1960 rate is especially indicative, because it surpassed the general rate of population increase by 0.6 percent (el Saaty 1980:149). Whereas the population of both Cairo and Alexandria comprised around one fifth of Egypt’s population in the mid-century, the population of Cairo alone jumped in 1966 to comprise 16.5 percent (and 18.5 percent in 1976) (Mirqis 1988:20).

By the end of the nineteenth century the population of the city of Beirut was estimated at 120,000. Yet in three decades, this figure rose to 205,541 (Kawtharani 1984: 44). As for Syrian cities, Damascus almost doubled its population in seventy years from 112,500 in 1842 to 142,000 in 1876 and 222,604 in 1911/12 (Ghazzal 1993: 38, 43). For Aleppo, we have a more recent figure from the year 1922, which is 156,749 (Kawtharani 1984: 52-3). By 1960 these figures rose to 530,000 and 425,000 respectively (Zakariyya 1990: 178). In 1960 Damascus comprised 31.5 percent of the

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1 However, in the fragmented Persia, only the capital city, which was Tabriz, made earlier big gains in population, from 40,000 in 1800 to 150,000 in 1860 (Ibid.).

2 This includes a community of non-Egyptian residents of some 63,500, around 7 percent of the total population.
total urban population of Syria, while Aleppo made 25.2 percent. As a percentage of the total population of Syria, the cities of Damascus and Aleppo comprised 20.9 percent.

Table - 3.2 -
Growth of Urban Population in Egypt
1907 - 1984

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total* (millions)</th>
<th>% Urban</th>
<th>Grand Cairo**/Total Population %</th>
<th>Grand Cairo/ Total Urban %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Does not include those residing outside Egypt

** Cairo + Giza + Shubra al Khaima

Source: Mirqis 1988: 18-21

Despite the absence of reliable time series on the population of different cities in Iraq, the trend towards massive urbanization is easily recognizable from various indicators. Baghdad, whose population shrank to between 50,000 and 27,000 in the 1830s as we noted above, had a population of 248,350 a century later, according to a government census in 1929. In 1936, it was estimated that Baghdad had a population of 350,000, Mosul 100,000, and Basra 60,000 (Daleel 1936: 97, 865). Yet the huge flux was to come in the decade preceding the 1958 revolution. Although the following table shows the population of whole governorates (cities and their hinterlands), the influx of immigrants to the cities is clearly shown in the high rates of increase of the traditionally receiving governorates.

As can be seen from table 3.3, those governorates whose population growth over two decades ranged from 6.6 percent to 15.4 percent were net expellers of the workforce as the growth rates of their population ranged between 20 percent and one third of the rate of growth of the entire country. By contrast, Baghdad’s rate of growth was almost double the rate of growth of the total population. It grew to 1.3 million in 1957 and 2.2 million a decade later and was thus a net importer of immigrants, as well as Basra (1957-1967) and Kirkuk (1947-1957), the latter being the center of the oil industry.

Between 1919 and 1968 Iraq’s population increased threefold, while Baghdad governorate experienced an eight-fold increase, Kirkuk fivefold, Basra 4.5 times, Kerbala and Diyala fourfold, while ‘Imara had an increase over the same period of only 20 percent, Diwaniyya just doubled. ‘Imara, Nasiriyya and Diwaniyya were the most repelling governorates, Baghdad, Kirkuk and Basra being the most centrifugal governorates.
Table - 3.3 -  
Iraq: Population Growth Per Governorate  
1947-1967

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosul</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulaimaniyya</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arbil</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirkuk</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>1,313</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>2,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kut</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diwaniyya</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Imara</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasirriyya</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basra</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Iraq Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,826</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,340</strong></td>
<td><strong>35.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>8,547</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Najmil Deen 1970: 107

The Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the number of immigrants to Baghdad, especially the city itself to be 159,000 between 1947 and 1957 and 236,309 between 1957 and 1966, mostly coming from 'Imara. Basra received in the two respective periods 43,000 and 32,000 immigrants, while Kirkuk received 39,000 and 25,000 immigrants (Najmil Deen 1970: 114).

From an average 8-10 percent of the total population in the late nineteenth century, Middle East cities increased their share to more than 30 percent in the 1950s. But this high rate of urbanization was not an extension of the historical trend of relatively high proportion of city dwellers in this part of the world. For this time a novel trend was at play; namely that the growth in urban population was mainly confined to two or three cities in each country, and later mainly to the capital city. This explains how two major cities in each Mashreq country came to host 20 percent or more of the total population. In other words, the irony of modern urbanization in the Middle East lies in that the many towns that previously served as regional markets, centers for crafts demanded by peasants or other towns, seats for Ottoman walls, or centers for garrisons, were now eclipsed by the rise of a central city dominating most political and economic activities within the country.

This process cannot be dissociated from the creation of the modern national spaces in the Mashreq countries. The latter process in its turn was strongly related with the rise of new powerful pressures and trends that shaped the Mashreq's trajectories. Thus two major developments have intertwined to produce the twentieth-century patterns of urban inflation in the Mashreq: one is the rise of the modern state, and the other is the radical changes in transportation and trade patterns with the west.

How did the Middle East towns cope with this flood of immigrants? Did they face a "beggars' plague" like the one that Paris- and other European cities- witnessed long before they embarked on industrialization? Or, was there a capitalist dynamic

Furthermore, the above author suggests that the number of immigrants may have been higher than that, because the estimates of migration relied on figures furnished by the Directorate of Civil Affairs. Thus only those who moved their civil register with them were taken into account.
that could make use of this ‘reserve army of labor’, to quote the famous phrase of Marx?  

The level of urbanization in the late 1940s was roughly equivalent to that of Europe in the 1890s as was noted above. But whereas Europe reached that level when industry made 20 - 25 percent of its GDP and urban activities in general produced the bulk of its wealth, the Middle East was far from achieving anything comparable. The rise of modern economic activities in the Middle East, as well as the majority of third world countries, did not gather momentum until the end of WWII. The share of manufacturing in Turkey’s GNP rose only from 12 percent in 1923 to 13 percent in 1946 (Owen and Pamuk 1999: 244); the share of manufacturing and petroleum in Egypt’s GNP accounted for 7.75 percent in 1950 (Central Bank 1963: 464), manufacturing accounted for 9.3 percent in Iran’s GDP in 1959 (Bharier 1971: 60), 7.1 percent of Iraq’s national income in 1953, 11.8 percent of Syria’s net domestic product in 1956 (including extraction and electricity) and 13.5 percent in Lebanon in 1950 (Owen and Pamuk 1999: 257-9). Thus a period of more than a century of contacts and insertion in the world capitalist market did not only lead to very disappointing rates of growth of the “modern sectors” in the economies of the region, but also to more modest contributions of the “modern” social groupings in the economic and social life of these countries, given that much of the industrial growth of these countries was actually state led (especially in Turkey and Iran) and that most of these industries were mainly in the fields of food processing and textile, clothing and other low value added branches.

By contrast to the virtual absence of a differentiated and sophisticated class of industrialists, affluent urban classes of merchants, bankers and urbanized landowners were to be seen almost everywhere in the major cities of all the countries of the Middle East. This, as we have seen, gave rise to the various interpretations on the ‘peculiarity’ of the region’s capitalism.

A culturalist point of view tended to emphasize the role that Islam gave to trade and merchants. Then in a later stage came the various anti-imperialist theories which linked the absence of industrialization to the role of imperialism and concluded therefore that a process of capitalist ‘take-off’ in this region (or in the entire third world for that matter) was impossible. What I have tried to show in the preceding chapters is that there is nothing peculiar about this ‘peculiarity’ once we admit that the dominant social formations of the region were precapitalist, despite all the “modern” edifices that existed here and there in the region, and once we go beyond the mistaken textbook schemas on capitalist development in Europe itself. But this only solves half of the problem: i.e. analyzing the dominant structures on the eve of transition to modernity. A no less formidable problem is still unsolved: where then did the urge for the radical social changes of the 1950s come from? And what was the social content of these changes? The story of the waves of migrations to the major cities and how the migrants articulated with the urban structures can provide us with the answers to these questions.

The above figures plainly reveal the nature of what we normally call “underdevelopment”; namely that it is the social configuration of a precapitalist formation whose passage to capitalism is blocked by its internal social, or class

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* As elsewhere in this work, developments in Palestine/Israel will not be discussed because of the complicated nature of the problem, which led to the displacement of the Palestinian People and the creation of the state of Israel. It is the view of this author that the rise and development of Israeli society is identical to the cases of European colonization emigration to many parts of the world in the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries, and should be studied as such.
structure. The colonial powers and later the advanced capitalist centers played a very important role in discouraging processes of industrialization via their insistence on liberalizing the domestic markets and thereby putting the nascent industries under the mercy of fierce competition from better-quality and cheaper goods. But the determinant factors in this blockage were the precapitalist structures that could not mobilize sufficient forces to withstand the western pressures, and the dominance of economically liberal precapitalist interest on the social formations of the Mashreq. Only when the functioning of these structures entered into its final crisis could antagonistic forces impose a radically different program. Put differently, we can say that the crises of the previous formations engendered numerous victims that exerted powerful pressures to overthrow the ancien regimes.

The mass exodus of rural peasants was a clear indicator of the crisis of the agrarian systems that were in place until the land reforms were passed in the 1950s. As agriculture was increasingly commercialized, the landlord’s pressure to squeeze as much surplus as possible from his peasants led to the disintegration of communal and/or kinship ties between the two parties. It is noteworthy that in all the Middle East, those areas where no small peasantry was allowed to survive were the ones that witnessed the highest rates of land desertion and immigration to towns. Where super-large estates were the norm, the landless peasants - in Egypt and Iraq especially, but also in the south of Lebanon and the eastern parts of Syria - were left with nothing to live on except the search for seasonal or occasional work. But even where peasants were allotted a parcel to till for the landlords, the heavy debts and repression led many to flee the land - in many cases illegally - because they were bound by that eternal debt to the landlord, village usurer, and/or shopkeeper. But how did the city, which the immigrant sought as a refuge and a haven, look like?

3.1 The Segregated City:

Until the waves of internal migration gathered momentum in the 1930s and 1940s - in Egypt it began earlier - the composition, activities and division of labor within major cities in the Middle East were very similar to those of preindustrial Europe. Under the Ottomans:

"[The population] was composed of a large number of groups, local, tribal, linguistic and religious. On the whole, these groups formed closed communities. Each was a ‘world’, sufficient to its members and exacting their ultimate loyalty. The worlds touched but did not mingle with each other, each looked at the rest with suspicion and even hatred. Almost all were stagnant, unchanging and limited; but the Sunni world, although torn by every sort of internal dissension, had something universal, a self-confidence and sense of responsibility which the others lacked. They were all marginal, shut out from power and historic decisions."

Hourani 1947: 22

The individual did not really exist as such. Communities clustered in their suburbs, specialized in particular jobs, created their own ‘vertical’ loyalties and developed their relations with others accordingly. In Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century:

"[S]hoes manufacturing and repair were almost entirely in the hands of Greeks, Armenians and Maltese; trade in wool and cloth in the hands of Jews, Syrians and Europeans, while sewing industry was monopolized by Jews, welding in the hands of the Maltese, and photography in the hands of Armenians."
For most of the recent history, this formula provided an excellent modus operandi for the functioning of all communities in a peaceful way. Perceptions of injustice or inequality certainly existed, but these could be harnessed in ordinary times since the ideological legitimization for the functioning of communities rested upon some ‘natural’ traits that endowed descendents from a certain region, tribe, confession, ethnicity, or sect with the performance of their particular jobs. Yet, this did not apply to sudden changes that drastically shifted the balance to the interest of one community on the expense of others. These changes that took place since the mid-nineteenth century, and which the communities themselves had no hand in producing, could and did disrupt the delicate equilibrium upon which the system rested and spark bloody conflicts like the ones that Damascus and Mount Lebanon witnessed in the 1850s and 1860s.

Bloody conflicts between regions, villages and tribes were recurrent in the rural areas naturally, despite the fact that rural areas were generally more homogenous ethically and religiously, or more accurately: despite the fact that each community lived in a separate territory in general.7

In 1925 Edmond Rabbat, an ardent advocate of Syria’s unity, wrote a pamphlet with a telling title: “Les Etats-Uni e de Syrie”. The obstacles to the formation of this “united states”, according to the author, was the diversity of religious affiliations of the population, which bred economic isolation and collective specialization by the different confessions. He went on to emphasize that competition among members of the various confessions or on the level of the country was non-existent “Thus agriculture belongs to the Muslims, and commerce is to large extent in the hands of Christians. Sometimes, and according to the region, a certain profession is totally in the hands of Muslims or Christians or Jews.”

Another obstacle, according to Rabbat, was the wide regional disparity. And the example he cited was Aleppo, whose wealthy demand that their city be independent of Damascus. “They raise the slogan ‘Aleppo’s wealth for its people’ as if Damascus and the rest of Syria is an alien country, and their homeland is exclusively Aleppo, and their national goals are the pavement of Aleppo’s streets and cleaning its suburbs from dust.” (Cited in Kawtharani 1984:242).

Various factors intertwined to make Middle Eastern cities much more heterogeneous and much less representative of the whole population than the countryside. The main factor is that urban occupations were practically the only available means for living for the non-dominant sects/ethnicities.

Until 1856, when the Ottomans adopted a policy of equality of all subjects irrespective of their confession, non-Muslims, and probably non-Sunni Muslims, had little access to the main source of wealth production: land ownership. Before that Christians and Jews were treated as second class subjects and were deprived of many rights, according to Nadhmi, who expressed his doubts that the 1856 reform decrees could have really led to equality, since the Ottoman administration was extremely inefficient during this period (Nadhmi 1984: 36). Copts in Upper Egypt, Assyrian/Chaldean Christian communities in Northern Iraq, and Christian communities around Homs and in al Jazeera regions in Syria did constitute relatively numerous and compact groups that had been in their land since time immemorial and

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7 This statement should be qualified regarding Syria and Lebanon especially. The civil war of 1860 in Mount Lebanon was sparked by the exploitation of the Muslim-Druze feudal lords of the Maronite-Catholic peasants. Syria’s coastal territories were tilled by extremely destitute Alawite peasants for the benefit of Sunni, Christian and a few Alawite landlords.
did have their lands even before the Ottoman decrees of 1856, but they preserved a communal mode of tilling and exploiting land – generally under the supervision of a Patriarch – until the formation and development of the sharecropping systems in the Mashreq. And when new developments occurred, the rule was that urban merchants and bureaucrats - Moslem or Christian - laid their hands on their lands and not the local Christian notables.

A second factor that may explain the non-representative character of the Mashreq cities is that several generations of Turkish and Mamluk bureaucrats and military personnel lived and thrived in the cities to which they had been assigned. Even when they were no longer in their posts, many of these joined the local notables and became part of the city’s social fabric. Then there are the persecuted minorities who fled from Turkey and Russia (Armenians, Circassians, Assyrians, etc.) and found no other shelter but the cities. A fourth factor, which was of particular importance in the case of Egypt, is the European migrations that followed the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Egypt’s bankruptcy in 1879 and the British occupation of 1882.

From 3000 in 1836, the number of foreigners in Egypt rose to more than 68,000 in 1878. In 1891, their numbers rose to 91,000, of whom around 8,200 lived in the Canal cities, around 22,000 in Cairo and 47,000 in Alexandria (A. Barakat 1977: 191-2). These numbers continued to rise dramatically reaching more than a quarter of a million in 1917. At their peak, they represented almost one-quarter of Alexandria’s population and 10 percent of Cairo’s population.

These numbers, however, are highly exaggerated, because many Christian Syrians, Arab citizens of French colonies (Algerians and Moroccans), as well as Jews benefited from the preferential treatment for Europeans to register as ones. The above source concludes that the actual number of westerners in 1947 was 142,800 and not 184,400. The number of French citizens, which was 17,800, was made up of 9600 ‘real’ French subjects and 3,200 from the Grand Maghreb. And out of the 31,500 registered British in 1947, only 13,300 were authentic British, while 7,800 were Maltese, and around 1000 were Indians (Hamdan 1996: 342, 352, 354).

Yet the non-representative composition of Mashreq cities was mainly linked to the heavy presence of those sections of the indigenous populations that were, for ethnic and confessional reasons, not part of the socially, politically and economically dominant strata during the Ottoman era. Having no or little access to land ownership or the bureaucracy, they tended to cluster in separate suburbs in the towns and work in jobs that members of the predominant confessions/ethnicities (even when they themselves were among the poor) considered inferior, unworthy, or simply did not know about. The non-dominant ethnicities/confessions were not necessarily minorities in their own respective countries.

Table – 3.4 -
Foreigners in Egypt
1907-1976

97
A wave of peaceful conversion of Iraqi tribes to Shi’ism from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries turned Shi’is into the majority of the population, so that by the early twentieth century they formed around 56 percent of the population (Nakash 1994: 13). Yet the Sunni confession of the Ottoman state prevented those Shi’is from occupying high posts in the bureaucracy, military or judiciary. The Ottoman empire, just like Europe’s medieval monarchies, derived its legitimacy from upholding and defending religion, and an “authentic” version of that religion to be exact. That is why it was less tolerant of non-Sunni Muslims than of non-Muslims in general:

“Islamic intolerance was generally directed against the Shi’is and other heterodox Muslims …rather than against Christians and Jews. Both the latter enjoyed a form of protection of minorities…which has enabled them to maintain their respective identities until the present time, although at the cost of accepting second - class citizenship for their members.

The status of *Ahl al-Kitab*\(^8\) allowed Christians and Jews to retain their religious organisation, their personal status, places of worship and religious trusts. This protected status was further institutionalised under the Ottoman Empire when their communities were officially recognised as *Millets*, or (religious) ‘nations’.

Van Dam 1981:17

Whereas *Ahl al-Kitab* were allowed to practice their activities and some of their members could rise to prominent positions, ‘heterodox’ Muslims were generally persecuted with degrees of severity that varied according to the gap that separated their beliefs from Sunni Islam on the one hand, and the power relations between the state and each of the heterodox communities on the other. Thus the more numerous Shi’is were able to gradually make their presence in Baghdad and to a lesser extent Beirut, while very few, if any, Alawis, Druzes, or Yazidis had this privilege until the beginning of the twentieth century. By contrast, Christians and Jews, whose existence in the Mashreq predates that of many Muslims had a heavy presence in cities for the same reasons mentioned above.

According to an 1892 report, Baghdad’s population was 194,941. The number of Muslims was 124,459, Jews 12,182, Armenians 408, Catholics 922, Protestants 25,

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\(^8\) *Ahl al-Kitab* (holders of the book) is a term used by Moslem theologians to describe those who belong to other religions whom Islam recognizes their prophets as truly sent by god. These are Christianity and Judaism.
followers of the Latin Church 458 and 277 Europeans (Darwish 1892: 421-4). A more reliable estimate pertains to the year 1917. According to it, out of a total population of 210,200,310 there were 50,000 Jews, 12,000 Christians, 8,000 Kurds and 800 Persians (Ghami 1997: 210, Nadhmi 1984: 301 fn.)

According to estimates made by the British political governor of Mosul, Arabs represented no more than one third of the Wilaya’s population during WWI, as can be seen from the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic and Confessional Composition of Mosul during WWI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Arab Races</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Kurdish Races</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Muslims</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nadhmi 1984: 95

The 1850s Moslem-Christian conflicts, which erupted in Damascus and Mount Lebanon (in each case for entirely different reasons), led to an improvement of the economic standing of non-Moslems:

“[L]ocal Christian and Jewish merchants gained positions on the expense of Europeans. In 1855, the French Consul wrote that ‘because of the loosening of pressures on them [Christians and Jews], they were able to forge direct contacts with Europe’. European agencies were forced to move to the internal localities like Urfa, Diyar Bakir, Mosul and Baghdad.”

Van Dam 1981: 222

In Lebanon Christians began to dominate Beirut numerically. Before 1860, Beirut was a predominantly Sunni city (Ruppert 1999: 37). By the end of the nineteenth century, only one third of Beirut’s 120,000 population were Muslims, while two thirds were Christian - mostly Catholics - whose numbers were around 40,000. (Kawtharani 1984: 44, citing Cuinet 1896: 53)

This numerical predominance coincided with an economic one, when Christian - especially Orthodox and Catholic - families dominated foreign trade with Europe.

The Egyptian occupation of Syria in 1831 was the first shock to the religious establishment in Damascus. Fulfilling his father’s (Muhammad Ali) will, Ibrahim Pasha initiated a series of reforms, which led to putting Greater Syria under the administrative rule of Damascus. Ibrahim tried to reorganize the Syrian economy such that it would supply the rising industries of the Egyptian government with raw material. This was carried by imposing state monopoly on silk, cotton and soap production.

Nadhmi puts the number of Jews mistakenly as 80,000. Ghanima’s book -originally published in 1924- gives the details of a census that was carried by the British occupation administration of Iraq for the number of Jews. According to it, there were 87.5 thousand Jews all over Iraq, 50,000 of whom lived in Baghdad. In an appendix to the last cited source written by Mir Basri, the head of the Jewish community in Iraq until the 1970s, the author confirms this figure and adds that in the 1947 population census Jews comprised 2.3 percent of Iraq’s population (118 thousand out of 4.5 million), but they comprised 25 percent of Baghdad’s population (Ghanima: 1997: 261-2).
Table 3.6 -
Sectarian Distribution of Beirut’s Population
In the 1930s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sect/Religion</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Muslims</td>
<td>57849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi’i Muslims</td>
<td>10399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druze</td>
<td>1883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Muslims</strong></td>
<td><strong>70131</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox Armenians</td>
<td>35658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Orthodox</td>
<td>19792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maronites</td>
<td>15216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics</td>
<td>5767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian Catholics</td>
<td>5258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian Catholics</td>
<td>40003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
<td>3676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>2136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacobites</td>
<td>2916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaldean Catholics</td>
<td>955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Christians</strong></td>
<td><strong>130477</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>4933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>205541</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kawtharani 1984: 44.

The development that was met with the greatest opposition from the religious establishment and the Muslim upper classes in Damascus (and other towns) was related to the equality accredited to religious minorities and opening up the holy and socially conservative Damascus to the direct European influence. Now it was possible for Christians to enter the Shoura (Advisory) Council and to trade in cattle and grain, which had been hitherto a monopoly for Muslims.¹⁰ (P. Khoury 1983: 35-6). By the 1860s, Jews and Christians constituted a little bit less than 20 percent of Damascus’ population.

Table 3.7 -
The Confessional Composition of Damascus’ Population
1842 – 1911/12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sect/Religion</th>
<th>1842</th>
<th>1911/12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunnis</td>
<td>90500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi’is</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alawis</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druzes</td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁰ Hence, most Muslim notables who could not mobilize popular resistance to Ibrahim Pasha were happy when the Europeans forced him to withdraw from Syria.
### Table: Sects and Populations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sect</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Muslims</td>
<td>95150</td>
<td>84.58%</td>
<td>119750</td>
<td>88.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Catholics</td>
<td>5805</td>
<td></td>
<td>6282</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian Catholics</td>
<td>270</td>
<td></td>
<td>237</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian Apostolic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>413</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>131</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syriac Catholics</td>
<td>585</td>
<td></td>
<td>739</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaldeans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacobites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maronites</td>
<td>290</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latins</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Orthodox</td>
<td>5290</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>6569</td>
<td>6.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian Orthodox</td>
<td>190</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Christians</td>
<td>12500</td>
<td>4.31%</td>
<td>14968</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>4850</td>
<td></td>
<td>10129</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The 1911/12 census did not specify the sects of Damascus' Muslims. The terms Greek, Roman, Syriac and Latins refer to the Churches to which Christians belonged and not to ethnicity.

Source: compiled from Ghazal 1993: 38,43

The Christians of Damascus clustered mainly in the east and southeast suburbs of the old city in the Bab Touma (Thomas Gate) quarter whose boundaries lied within the walls. This part of the city was the home of non-Suni Muslims in general: Jews, Christians, and Shi'ites (Na'isa 1986: 81). Christians controlled almost the entire building crafts: masons, brick laying, marble cutters, etc., as well as being predominant in such jobs as translators, drapers, tailors, goldsmiths, needle makers and brick makers (Ghazal 1993: 132-3). To these professions, an 1879 Syrian author asserted that “the most important branches of textile production are in the hands of the Christian nation” (Qasatli 1879: 122). But even within each confession there was a division according to ethnicity (Armenians specializing in photography, for example) or to sect: Orthodox practicing different jobs from Catholics. Accordingly, suburbs were also divided along sub-sectarian lines.

The Jews, who were even less numerous than the Christians, lived in Harat al Yahood (the Jewish Quarter) in the southeast of the walled city facing the Christian quarter. Here too, the quarter was subdivided to suburbs for members of each sect (Na'isa 1986: 81). With the exception of the moneychangers, the poorer sections of the Jews practiced rudimentary jobs: wall plasterers, shoe polishers, makers of cloth bags, and sewage cleaners (Ghazal 1993: 134).

Batatu cites a British Consular report written in 1910 on the Jews of Baghdad. According to it, wealthy merchants and moneychangers formed no more than 5 percent, petty traders, retail dealers, and employees of middling income 30 percent, poor people 60 percent, and professional beggars 5 percent (Batatu 1978: 257).

Living in separate quarters of cities was not only the case of Jews and Christians in Damascus. Abu Saifayn and al Tawrat (Torah) in Baghdad, and Wadi

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*The same author specifies one page later that silk weaving is performed to the degree of perfection "although no improvement has been made to its tools because it is in the hands of the Christian nation that has no fortune [to allow its members to invest]. Rather they make their everyday living out of its products thanks to the cheapness of silk and people's total dependence on them."*
Abu Jameel in Beirut were the Jewish quarters in those cities. In Aleppo, Bahsita was the Jewish quarter, Aziziya the Christian quarter, while Armenian Christians lived in Sulaymaniyaa. In the meantime, not only non-Muslims, of course, lived in separate suburbs. Kurds and other non-Arab ethnic groups had their own quarters. But the larger a community was, the more likely it was that the sub-divisions of these quarters would be organized on class lines. Thus Tabbat al Kurd and Hay al Akrad, in Baghdad and Damascus respectively were virtual mini-towns further subdivided according to the occupation and income level of their inhabitants. The poorest Kurds in Aleppo lived in Shaikh Maqsoud suburb, while the better off inhabited al Ashrafiyya, the ‘heretic’ Yazidi Kurds lived in Hay Bani Zayd, while Bustan al Pasha was amixed Turkman-Kurd suburb12.

Beirut, which formed a semi-circle on the east coast of the Mediterranean, presented an interesting case for a confessionally segregated city. The southern part of the city was occupied by Sunnis. To the north, Christian who did not belong to one of the major churches occupied the west-central suburbs. Going further east, Syrian Orthodox suburbs occupied the heart of the city, while Sunnis occupied the east-central suburbs. These latter were generally migrants who resided as close as possible to the southern Sunni quarters. Further north, a Jewish enclave on the coast was surrounded by Maronite suburbs to the east and Syrian Catholic and Greek Catholic suburbs to the north and northeast. The marginalized Shi’is and Kurds occupied the extreme northern slums of the old Beirut (Ruppert 1999: 149).

Non indigenous populations in the Mashreq also tended to live in separate quarters, partly for reasons of protection, and partly because of common interests and ways of livelihood. Al Ma’adi in Cairo, and al Ibrahimyya in Alexandria were entirely occupied by Europeans (Hamdan 1996: 331).

But it would be misleading to confine our analysis of the segregation of Middle Eastern cities to the religious/ethnic aspects alone, for that would distort the reality and complexity of the division of labor and symbiosis in these cities. As can be seen from the above analysis, each community was also horizontally divided between upper, middle and poor classes. And from the types of activities practiced by the members of different communities it is easily discernible that communities were not closed castes or societies. With the exception of explicitly religious functions, each activity was demanded by the whole society and not only by members of a particular sect or confession.

A Middle Eastern city was a locus of transacting communities. Transaction did not pass via the individual but via communities. And therefore, each community lived in its own suburb, had its distinctive means of livelihood, its own youth to defend it from others, and its own notables who mediated between the members and the authorities, or who acted on its behalf in dealing with other communities. This social organization derived directly from the isolation of suburbs. A quarter was actually a mini-town. Within its gates it contained its own mosque, church or temple, public baths and local markets. Each quarter had its own source of water supply. Because of the autonomy of the quarters, there arose the need for a local authority that would play a mediating role: conveying its demands to the authorities and vice versa. This role was played by a one or more shaikhs of the quarter, in addition to its economic and religious notables. Under this authority served the quarter’s police who were assumed to know the different alleys of the quarter, and the families that occupied each of these alleys (Na’isa 1986: 82-3).

12 The information on the spatial/communitarian division of Aleppo has been obtained by the author through interviews.
Communities were not necessarily distinguished along ethnic/confessional lines. Specializing in a craft or descent from a common region or tribe could constitute a community. Until the beginning of the twentieth century the heart of Baghdad was occupied by two neighboring longitudinal districts separated by the main city street. To the west the administrative/bureaucratic/military elite and their dependents lived. These were mostly Sunni Moslems: Arabs, Turks and Kurds. To the east was the mercantile and crafts center, mainly occupied by Shi'is, Jews and Christians. Within each of these land strips, there were residential suburbs for each. The further away one goes from the center of activity (commercial or administrative) the poorer the residential areas were. On the outskirts of each center, one would find the poorer communities- normally members of communities specializing in doing the meaneest jobs. The residential areas of merchants, usurers, or bureaucrats lied closer to the center of activity. According to Batatu:

"[T]he groups that belonged to different faiths, sects, or classes or that were of different ethnic or tribal origin tended to live in separate mahallahs [quarters]. For example, on Baghdad’s main bank- the eastern bank- the Shi’is lived in ad-Dahhanah, Sababigh-il-Al, al-Qushal [A section of this quarter was inhabited by Jews], Suq-il-Attarin, and other quarters, the Jews mostly in at-Tawrat, Tahit-Takyah, Abu Saifain, and Suq Hannun, the Christians in ‘Aqd-in-Nasarah and Ra’s-il-Qaryah. Much of the rest of the eastern side of the city was Sunni, but subdivided on other lines. Thus al-Maydan was inhabited by the Turkish military, al-Haydarkhanah by “aristocratic” families and upper officials, Dukkan Shnawah by lower officials, inner Bab-ish-Shaik by artisans, and Babish-Shaikhs’s outer fringes by Baghdadi army officers of humble origins, and other elements." Batatu 1978: 18

Damascus presents an interesting case where a politically and economically dominant merchant/landowner/bureaucratic stratum emerged from the segregated city to form its recognized leadership. From leaders of their respective quarters and residents among ‘their’ own communities, notables tended to move away to an exclusive quarter where Damascene notables began to form as a coherent class. Al Maidan, a suburb extending south of Damascus, was a strong fort for the ex-Janissaries. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, al Maidan was not part of the city of Damascus properly speaking. The ex-Janissaries settled there and turned into traders in grain and cattle with the south of Syria, especially Hawran. Since the guild system in Damascus itself was family controlled and free practice of crafts was forbidden in the old city, al Maidan was receptive of newcomers who practiced crafts more freely.

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13 The social organization of the old Mashreq cities is perhaps best described in literature written by Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi novelists. In a moving novel (which is actually an autobiography) an ex-Iraqi Jew (who is a Canadian now) describes Baghdad in the 1940s where Jewish, Christian, and Muslim shops sat side by side in the city center, but where each community had its separate private life, suburbs and rituals. Yet the author also vividly recounts his estrangement from the suburbs and lives of the poor Jews of Baghdad. See Naim Kattan (1986) Adieu Bab’lone, Editions Lemac, Ottawa.

14 This statement should be qualified because this ‘main street’ was only dug in 1917, in the last year of the Ottoman rule of Iraq. To the best of the present author’s knowledge, no study has been conducted on the circumstances that motivated the choice of this particular path to be the city’s main street and therefore I am ignorant of whether there had already been a street separating these two districts before opening this road officially. But whether there had been a rudimentary route predating this street or not, the fact remains that it separated two seemingly distinct realms within one city.
The same occurred in al Salhiyya, a village-suburb northeast of Damascus, where many immigrant Kurds settled because they were unable to settle in Damascus itself. Thanks to the Egyptian occupation of the 1840s and later to the Ottoman protection some of those Kurds would turn into part of the upper classes of Damascus by the end of the nineteenth century. Thus many families whose initial power base was al Maidan like al Ḍābīd, Sukkar, al Mahayni, al Maidani and al Bitar moved from al Maidan to the center of Damascene aristocracy: Souk Saruja. Other Kurdish notables whose power base was in al Salhiyya like al Yousif-Shamdin Agha, Buzo, and Aghribuz and used to live in Hay al Ak rad (The Kurds’ Suburb) north of Salhiyya moved also to Souk Saruja by the end of the nineteenth century.

But this movement to a suburb where the newly formed city aristocracy would cluster was not confined to families coming from ‘faraway’ outskirts. Families like Al Azm, al Kailani, al ‘Ajlani, and al Jaza’iri moved from the traditional ‘Imara suburb to Souk Saruja too, while the Murdam Beys built an extension to the central souk where they resided. The al Quwwatli family represents an exceptional case because it did not move away from al Shaghour suburb where it lived since the eighteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, Souk Saruja, the Central Souk (al Hamidyya and Madhat Pasha) and al Qanawat (where al Barudi family lived), three adjacent suburbs in the heart of the commercial center of Damascus, were to become the residence of the city’s Moslem elite. Other notable families who kept their ties with their local popular power base stayed in their original suburbs, which were very close to the central souks anyway. Al Quwwatli in Shaghour, and Al Sham’a in Bab al Jabiyya - in the southwestern part of the central Souk.

According to P. Khoury, seven of these bureaucratic/landowning families (Al Azm, al Ḍābīd, al Yousif-Shamdin, Murdam Beck, al Quwwatli, al Sham’a, al Baroudi) plus the major five religious scholar-landowner families (al ‘Ajlani, al Ghazzi, al Kailani, al Hassibi, al Jaza’iri) formed the active political leadership of Damascus by the last third of the nineteenth century (P. Khoury 1983: 35-50).

Thus from local leaders who commanded the loyalty of the residents of a quarter of the city, these notables managed to play an active role as mediators between their social bases and the central authorities, forming alliances without alienating themselves from their local bases or adopting confrontational positions towards the Ottomans, and ending up as a class of landed/ merchant/ bureaucratic leadership of the city. It is noteworthy here that although notable Christians and Jews were faring extremely well economically and were represented in the local political bodies (as well as the pro-independence movement later on), their prestige was still contingent upon their command of loyalty of their respective communities. Hence they did not become part of the city’s leadership. By contrast, Sunni Muslim local notables gradually merged into a class that was no longer identified with its suburban base but became the leadership of Damascus.

Although the notables of Baghdad were much weaker than the entrenched mercantile elites of Damascus, they showed similar patterns of consolidating power via alliances and commanding the loyalty of their local constituencies. Apart from the heart of the city described briefly above, several pockets of urban conglomerations survived around. Just like al-Maidan and al-Salhiyya in Damascus, A’adhāmīyya and Kadhimuyyīya north of the heart of Baghdad were technically districts attached to the city but were becoming inalienable suburbs with the development of the horse-driven tramway lines in the late nineteenth century. These two districts were separated from the heart of the city by orchards and sparsely populated areas until WWI and the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in 1921. But two main differences between the
pattern of Iraqi expansion from localism and its Syrian counterpart follow from this description. The first difference was its lateness because ‘formal’ Baghdad only began to expand after the formation of the state in the 1920s, which is an indicator of the inability of the dominant strata to absorb and integrate newcomers to the city life. For whereas a relatively thriving commercial activity allowed Damascene elites to engage the lower strata in economic activity and command their political loyalty, Baghdadis had little such outlets and it was the formation of the ‘modern’ Iraqi state that generated demand for new jobs. Whether through direct recruitment to the nascent bureaucracy, military and paramilitary services, or through the demand for goods produced or furnished by the private sector (uniforms, furniture, buildings, etc.) the formation of the state was a means of consolidating the power of Iraqi notables.

The second difference followed from the first, namely that Baghdad’s expansion was largely due to the formation of a central state whose capital became that city, and therefore the old Ottoman-inherited cleavages were to be reproduced with this expansion. New suburbs flourished in the 1930s and onwards. The orchards and farms that used to separate the northern suburbs of al-A’dhamiya and Kadumiyah from Baghdad were now giving place to exclusive suburbs for the new elites that began to leave their local preserves and move to the wider city.

But because of the association of this expansion with the rise of the state and its demands for a new and larger bureaucracy, and because the Ottoman bureaucracy was heavily, if not exclusively drawn from Arab/Turkish-Sunni denominations, the subsequent expansion towards the formation of a ‘unified and centralized’ polity within the capital city was strongly affected by this state of affairs. The new suburbs that mushroomed beyond the old northern gate of Baghdad were predominantly occupied by Sunni families until around WWII. The predominantly Jewish and Shi’i merchant families experienced a process of expansion too. But curiously enough their modern suburbs were erected on the opposite side of the city, south of the old southern gate. In that part of the town the British had built their residence areas too, as well as the Christian migrants from northern Iraq who found new slums in the immediate proximity to the old southern gate. These confessional cleavages were to persist until around WWII, when greater mobility and integration of the state apparatus, as well as the mass exodus of the Jews following the establishment of the State of Israel, allowed Sunnis and Shi’is to come relatively closer to each other.

### 3.2 The Structure and Dynamics of Precapitalist Cities:

Before we can proceed with our analysis of the subsequent transformations of the Mashreq social formations, we have to address several theoretical issues regarding the nature of the above-described cleavages and solidarities in societies as a whole and in the urban centers in particular. The question that should be addressed first has been a recurrent one and relates to the applicability of such ‘modern’ concepts as social classes, interest groups and class and social conflicts to the Middle East. Indeed, reading the previous pages may give the impression that the Mashreq cities were the home of juxtaposed and isolated societies split along confessional lines and therefore it may be more appropriate to analyze them as vertical cultural groups rather than applying horizontal ‘western’ categories to them.

Yet the deficiency of culturalist approaches can easily be demonstrated once we go beyond the well-known episodes of inter-confessional clashes and conflicts and look at some of the turning-points in the modern history of the Mashreq: Moslems and Christians joining hands in the 1919 anti-British revolution in Egypt, Sunnis and
Shi‘is doing the same in the 1920 revolt in Iraq, and Christians championing the pan-Arabist movement for independence in Syria and Lebanon. But a more significant indicator of the fact that inter-communal relations were not unidirectional is that in many episodes the poor sections of different communities stood side by side to fight lords whose solidarity was clearly cemented by interests rather than by similar confessional belonging.

Many historians and social scientists that tried to rescue the universality of class and social analysis by showing its applicability to the Middle East (or other parts of the third world) have been at pains to emphasize this last argument. The fact remains however that *solidarities and conflicts took place mainly within communities and not across them*. And it is the endeavor of this study to apply a different approach to the problem of social division and consciousness and by implication the patterns of political leadership, under a precapitalist social formation. In order to address these issues, three questions should be answered adequately:

1. Were these ‘vertical’ divisions peculiar to the Mashreq, or do they represent a wider pattern whose rise and perpetuation are contingent upon specific conditions? In other words, is ‘horizontal’ solidarity a ‘European’ trait, or was its rise contingent upon conditions that could lead to the same effect anywhere? If the latter case is the answer, then we have to define the specific conditions for the rise of such forms of stratification.

2. How and why did people perceive and legitimate such relations/structures; in other words, what social function did these divisions fulfill?

3. Do these types of division and legitimation produce specific forms of political authority? If so, why and what forms do they take?

A classical structuralist approach to these questions will concentrate on analyzing the existing structures, their functioning and reproduction. While this approach can (and does) add much to our knowledge, it still lacks the power to explain transformations that eventually occur within these structures. A diachronic analysis of the contradictions within these structures is no less necessary in order to understand first, how such societies could survive over relatively long periods of time and second, to understand the processes that led to introducing changes within them and the outcome of these transformations.

In the above analysis of the Mashreq, I have represented the differentiation in identities mainly in terms of religious confession, ethnicity and tribe. Although all these factors played an important role in defining one’s identity and therefore one’s social standing and perspectives, they were by no means the only determinants. Cleavages within relatively larger communities were no less effective in shaping peoples’ destinies: urban vs. rural or bedouins is an obvious case in point. But a more subtle division occurred even within what we normally take to be a homogenous community, such as the predominantly Sunni Muslim community of urban artisans in the Mashreq. Here we have people sharing the same lifestyle and similar means of making their living. They live close to each other and interact with each other. Nevertheless, almost each guild in Cairo distinguished itself by joining a different Sufi order (A. Amir 1993: 30). The significance of this remark is that identities are not naturally given. Rather it is the level of development of a given social formation that defines the limits of expansion of each community, and regulates the political mechanisms that should be at play in order to preserve the balanced functioning of the various components of a society. But perhaps this form of stratification was after all a peculiarity of the Mashreq?
In addressing this question, one can choose many multi-ethnic or multi-confessional European societies as cases for comparison. The well-known religious wars preceding Westphalia are good reminders of the processes that led to the crystallization of the national states. In order to draw parallels with the Mashreq, where a division of labor based on confession and ethnicity was at play, one can also cite the examples of such ‘excluded’ communities as the Jews and gypsies in most European cities, as well as the opposite examples of the non-integrated but privileged merchant communities who until the rise of enlightened absolutisms were mostly foreigners.

But, apart from those communities whom the majority of the population considered ‘others’, can we draw parallels with the Mashreq stratification from Europe’s past? Pre-revolutionary France seems a very tempting case in this regard for several reasons. The first is that it is normally considered a relatively homogenous country from an ethnic and religious point of view. Second because it was the hotbed of the bourgeois revolution, whose stylized account presupposes the existence of a large urban population that has discarded all kinds of local solidarities and joined in as unified and conscious classes. Third, because the secular slogans of the French revolution would lead one to expect that religion played a minor role in the lives of ordinary urban people prior to the revolution.

Paris did not reach a population of half a million until the eighteenth century, and only then could it claim to compose a meager 2 percent of the French population. In that period, six French cities had a population ranging from sixty thousand to one hundred thousand, around ten cities with a population of thirty to forty thousand each. All in all, the urban centers of France hardly harbored three million people; that is 15 percent of the French population (Goubert 1969: 165).

How were these three million urban people organized? Originally, the bourgeoisie, or the third estate was more of a legal status than a coherent community. But long before the political transformations in Europe, that legal status had become a remote memory, which nobody cared to apply to existing realities. In a system which never recognized the individual, except as a member of a group: “l’homme isolé...paraît à la fois inconcevable et scandaleux” (Goubert 1969: 169). Yet members of sub-groups had a very clear sense of identity and difference from other groups, this otherness probably led to hostilities and friction within what we call the third estate, or the bourgeoisie. According to Pierre Goubert, the third estate was “an immense waste basket collecting all those that could not be enrolled in the first two”. The conscious sense of belonging to a certain group: craft or profession was not only made possible by ‘economic factors’, if one were to follow the current usage, but by a set of ‘ideological’ barriers. In the cities:

“Chacun y appartient à un corps. Chaque corps possède un statut juridique approuvé et, souvent octroyé, par l’autorité judiciaire et administrative. Chaque corps revêt un caractère religieux, symbolisé souvent par sa consécration à un (saint patron)), et par des cérémonies religieuses célébrées en commun.”

Goubert 1969: 172, italics and bold added

Members of different guild were not only segregated by following different saints, but also by living in different quarters of the city, which kept its medieval architecture until the 1860s; i.e. some seven decades after the revolution. A rigid and monopolistic crafts system made it virtually impossible for newcomers and immigrants to practice their skills within the city borders. Thus the ‘faubourgs’ - the

15 All translations from French are mine.
suburbs lying outside the city proper - came into existence, just like the al-Maidan quarter south of Damascus.

Marshall Berman vividly describes how George Eugene Haussmann, the mayor of Paris and its surroundings was equipped with a royal decree from Napoleon III to open up a huge network of boulevards in the heart of the old medieval city. These new constructions did away with hundreds of buildings and forced thousands of people to leave their homes by destroying whole suburbs that had been in place for centuries. But in the meantime the whole city was thrown open for the first time in history for all its inhabitants. Only then- after eight decades of the revolution- was it possible to move not only within the suburbs but also between suburbs after centuries of life in a pyramid of isolated cells (Berman 1983: 139-40).

The example of Paris shows that the segregated urban society- and the segregated and subclass consciousness- are not Middle East phenomena, but rather precapitalist ones. Yet establishing the fact that this form of social structuring existed in virtually every part of the precapitalist world is not to explain it. We should now turn to the more subtle questions of why and how did such structuring exist? How was it legitimated? And what forms of authority sanctioned it?10

The hypothesis that I present here is that the level of technological development -especially communication technology - defines the limits of interaction within space and therefore defines the number of people who can gainfully engage in each of the known and needed material and non-material activities. Such an abstract statement needs some elaboration. Many authorities have shown that the level of agricultural productivity played a decisive role in defining the limits of societal differentiation over time, by defining the number of people who could engage in non-agricultural activities and still could be fed by the work of others (Bairoch 1975). The number of people whom a society can afford to raise to the level of rulers, exploiters, professional warriors and ideologues was undoubtedly a function of agricultural productivity. But the level of agricultural productivity is subject to another constraint; namely the ability to transfer food and labor form one point to another, and it is here that communication technology comes to the forefront. Rising productivity without an ability to transfer grain and food from one place to another would be a check on further expansion because the ‘absorptive capacity of the local market’ -to use a contemporary coinage- is limited.

Perry Anderson described the unfortunate position of those European regions that had no access to the sea -the main communications means until the nineteenth century- by reminding us “that it was cheaper in the epoch of Diocletian to ship wheat from Syria to Spain... than to cart it 75 miles over land” (Anderson 1974a: 20). Wittold Kula pointed to two contradictory effects of such constraint on transport and communication in the demesnes that did not lie on rivers; one was destructive in that the peasant in feudal Poland used to burn wood because of the non-ability to make use of it. The other effect was constructive because labor power/time that exceeded the needs for agriculture was exploited in manufacturing glass (Kula 1976: 48). A similar effect was described by James Claudius Rich in early nineteenth century Iraq, whereby rivers played a most crucial role in binding the towns lying on them, but other towns and rural areas had no way but to be appendages to the nearest river-looking town (Rich 1831: 157). Cathedrals, Pyramids and the grand monuments of

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10 These questions will be dealt with in more detail in the chapters on social formations and political authority.
past civilizations stand as witnesses to this phenomenon of human labor that agriculture could dispense with while not engaging in other productive activities.\footnote{17}

Basing his work on authoritative sources on the economic history of Europe, Herman Schwartz reminds the reader in a section with a telling title: "Agricultural Limits on State Formation" that "before mechanically powered transport, hardly anyone ever transported grain overland for more than twenty miles" (Schwartz 1994: 12). The significance of this seemingly technical statement is that even in countries, which have a history of state consolidation in Europe, such as England and France (or China, Egypt and Morocco in the non-industrialized world) we are talking about what Schwartz calls "microeconomies" coexisting within a political unity. He concludes that:

"Although microeconomies all lay nestled together, they had very little contact with each other, trading only a little with neighboring microeconomies and virtually nothing with more distant ones. \textit{Until the era of canals and railroads - and indeed well into that era- no such thing as a "national economy" existed.}"

Schwartz 1994: 13

What does this tell us about authority, identity, 'exogenous' and 'endogenous' factors?

Even in cases where 'microeconomies' were tied together by the existence of a central state authority -whether that was a European monarchy or an Asian Empire-the technical means were not sufficient to facilitate communication beyond a very limited geographical zone (except in those regions that benefited from sea or canal transport) We will show later that when ecological and/or defense requirements necessitated the rise of relatively large political entities, the existing power structures tended to correspond with the actual limits set by the existing technical conditions. Despite the appearances and the eighteenth-century myths about the omnipresent oriental empires, political authority at the center of these empires was either confined to a much narrower space, or it delegated much jurisdiction to the levels that could have effective command on a local level. Whenever this wasn't the case, i.e. whenever the legal level did not correspond to actually effective level, empires disintegrated and devolved into warring principalities.

The ensuing low level of productivity tended to produce rigid and non-shifting internal stratification within such small localities. For under these conditions adding one more smith or carpenter before the retirement of a functioning one can have far-reaching destabilizing consequences for the entire community, as demand for the basic services and products is almost constant, and occupational mobility is almost unthinkable. \textit{Thus a small locality is itself what constitutes society for its members, others being foreigners even if there is some sense of a common belonging due to shared religion or language.}

What from our vantage point is seen as warriors coming from within a given society to dominate its producers and establish the national state is only meaningful when we look at history retrospectively; i.e. that the "German" Teutonic Knights subjected "German" peasants and the Gaullists subjected "their" French compatriots, or that "Arab" tribes migrating from Arabia in the sixteenth to the eighteenth century

\footnote{17}This statement should not be taken as an economic interpretation of social structures. Cathedrals, grandiose mosques and pyramids were essential components of the ideological edifice, which legitimated the functioning of the respective societies. Erecting them stood as a testimony to the viability of the existing socio-political systems and people's dedication to these systems.
ruled “Arab” peasants or tribes in Iraq and Syria. But with the lack of communication until recent times, these people were foreigners to each other. As occupations and functional roles are pre-assigned according to regional, tribal, ethnic, or confessional lines, ‘class’ positions are seen as identities and those belonging to other occupations are ‘others’. Thus ‘otherness’ is essential for the perpetuation and reproduction of a stable pre-capitalist division of labor (and of its exploitative structure). An early form of inventing otherness is a tribe’s rituals to sanctify the position of its leader in order to become the worldly personification of god and its intermediary in conducting contacts with supra-natural forces, a function that can not be maintained if any one can bid for its fulfillment.

This kind of social structuring may look as an anomaly to a contemporary eye. But it is an anomaly only because we tend to take such notions as national space, nation, class and citizen as givens, as the ‘natural’ way of social existence. Once one poses the question on the conditions and prerequisites that made these notions come to existence, i.e. once one poses the historicity of such notions, the pre-capitalist categories cease to be anomalies. The coming into age of an enlarged identity: the nation, has not done away with the need to exclude others, it only redefined otherness on grounds that look “natural” to contemporary eyes, belonging to a common culture or speaking a common language, thus excluding ‘others’ from the right to compete for jobs and opportunities within the national space.

Yet it is not the birth of the ‘nation’ that allowed the specific configuration which revolves around the individual citizen, as we will see later. Rather it is the articulation of this structure: the nation with capitalism, a socio-economic system that expands perpetually through increasing productivity that allows for the free movement of individuals across professions and activities.

A structure based on non-expanding demand for crafts and urban services would necessarily require a system that discourages mobility and easy access to profitable fields. Crafts, as is well known, were not equally profitable, nor were those who practiced them looked upon with the same eye by society. Thieves, beggars, and prostitutes (who had their guilds in seventeenth century Cairo and eighteenth century Damascus) were different from tanners – amongst the least respected in the Middle East, and those were different from silk ware producers. But because the concept of the individual was “inconceivable and scandalous”, according to Goubert, the existing code system minimized the potential for friction by assigning whole communities the role of performing certain jobs. People tended to view their personal destinies in terms of their ‘primordial’ situation; that is, X being necessarily a blacksmith because he belongs to a certain sect, while Y has to be a carpenter because he belongs to some other saint of carpenters. This was the case in a society that was relatively homogenous from a religious point of view: the predominantly Catholic France, but

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18 In conditions of general scarcity, or in cases where additional labor force would not increase the total output in a commensurate proportion, a warring party may not afford to enslave or subjugate the conquered party because the victors themselves constitute a social pyramid of would be rulers and would be peasants. In such cases the outcome would either be the slaughtering of the defeated or ousting them beyond the conquered territory. This was the case of migrant tribes in Africa and many parts of the Middle East from around the fifteenth century until the beginning of this century.

19 “...[The development and maintenance of every culture require the existence of another different and competing alter ego” (Said, 1995: 3).

20 Hence the fact that despite the undoubted existence of nations with national states in many parts of the third world today, the Indian, Turkish or Persian for example, the non-dominance of capitalism on these formations imposes severe restrictions that prevent carrying a final assault on many forms of pre-capitalist social organization.
these distinctions could, and did, take several other forms in other times and places, as I have tried to show in the case of the Mashreq.

Was there a margin for mobility and friction within such a social hierarchy? The history of the nineteenth century Mashreq gives ample evidence for an affirmative answer. First there was the hierarchy within the guild system itself. From apprentices to the sheikhs of each guild, a hierarchical system allowed for ambitions and jealousies to come to the surface. But despite the wide income differentials within that structure and the deliberate attempts by the crafts' sheikhs to delay the promotion of their apprentices, it is difficult to discern manifestations of conflict between subordinates and chiefs. The reason behind this is that there was no separation between property and labor in the crafts' structure. The sheikhs and apprentices alike contributed their work, which naturally differed in quality and intensity. Rising within the hierarchy was dependent on the skills and not on ownership or heredity. A skilled craftsman would marry the daughter of his master consolidating thus professional ties by transforming them into blood ties.

The invaluable nineteenth-century monograph, The Dictionary of Syrian Crafts written by al-Qasimi, provides us with a second source of mobility. The author enumerates tens of defunct or extinct crafts as well as tens of others, which he labeled as in buoyant conditions because of the changing tastes and the appearance of new products/services (Al Ghazzal 1993, al-Siba'i 1968). Even at the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, it was customary that members of a community would engage collectively in practicing a job. The new service of photography was almost monopolized by Armenians, sewage cleaners were either Jews or Assyrians, and so on. But as was mentioned earlier, 'vertical' divisions were not only made on confessional lines. When al-Fanahra clan migrated to Baghdad, it specialized in producing 'new' products from palm tree leaves: baskets and straw-sticks for house cleaning. Likewise, descendants from 'Imara province joined the newly established police force en masse and composed the bulk of its file. But the kind of mobility that was to play a decisive role in sapping the foundations of the guild system was the one mentioned before and consisted of migrants settling on the fringes of the main cities in order to cater for changing or expanding demand. Eventually, the guilds or established families could not keep their grip on the crafts.

But a more crucial mobility-related dimension, one that may be the key to our understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of such systems is the one related to the changing relations between various urban groups. These changes occurred due to factors that were exogenous to the members of the groups and only took place sporadically, but they tended to alter the precarious balance that had been generally accepted by the various groups. Perhaps the major such change that had long lasting effects on the Mashreq formations was the one related to the opening of the Suez Canal. Suddenly whole towns lost their centuries-old privileged positions, while others gained importance. Many merchants gained and most artisans lost. Merchants associated with sea trade saw their socio-economic standing rocketing, while those associated with land routes suddenly collapsed. Moneylenders and changers gained, while producers of cloth lost because of the cheaper European products that flooded local markets. Cities far away from seaports such as Mosul gained because their markets were not drowned with cheaper consumer goods, but the new trade routes

21 Although several records show that when the shaikh of a craft died, his older son would traditionally succeed him, the appointment must nominally be approved by the major practitioners of the craft (Na'isa 1986: 290).
gave them access to cheaper raw material that was used in their industries (Shields 1991: 19ff).

The socio-political consequences of shifting the balance among various activities are not hard to discern. Since engaging in these activities was based upon collective ‘primordial’ lines, social unrest targeting the “nouveaux riches” necessarily took communitarian forms: attacks on people originating from particular areas, or belonging to a certain sects/confessions, or ethnicities. While not all the members of the targeted communities –especially the relatively large ones- could possibly benefit from the new shifts in the patterns of economic activity, it was often the case that all of them were targeted by the disenchanted communities. The logical conclusion then is that these clashes were interest conflicts that took various forms according to the circumstances.

Obviously, those who engaged in the conflicts legitimated their militancy in religious, ethnic or regional discourse. Historians often distinguish such conflicts by talking about civil wars, religious wars or ethnic cleansing which are presumed to be different from ‘social’ or ‘class’ conflicts. The assumption is that a conflict that is not waged explicitly by interest groups aware of their positions as classes does not merit this last designation. But as we will see, the turning points in the histories of European, as well as Mashreq societies witnessed joint actions by members of communities that hitherto thought of themselves as belonging to totally different realms. This leads us to the age-old discussion whether one can talk about social classes under precapitalism. And if so, how can we conceptualize social behavior, authority and legitimacy within a precapitalist world? We need to address these theoretical questions in order to pursue our quest for understanding the transforming processes of the precapitalist formations.