

# Violent and Nonviolent Changes in the Images of Cities in the Arab Spring Countries

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**Abstract.** The Arab Spring transformations have caused tangible impacts on the urban environment throughout the Middle East with varying levels. In some cities in countries like Libya, Yemen and Syria, deliberate and accidental destruction has taken place, resulting in severe transformations in the image of these cities that could be considered as lasting or difficult to amend. In some cities, the damage caused to urban built environment could be considered a co-lateral damage as a result of internal fighting between the people and their regimes, or the fighting between the different factions in the country or from external interference of regional or international powers. Urbicide, which is defined as a deliberate destruction of cities is also another form of damaging the built environment or the city image, in which parties in an internal conflict tend to destroy symbols or quarters of their rivals to inflict a tangible damage to their social and moral believes. The impacts on the built environment and the image of the city, can result as well from non-destructive measures, for example changes in land uses or decisions to demolish specific buildings that belong to the former era will also result in a clear change in the city image. This paper highlights the types of transformation of the city images that took place as a result of the Arab Spring revolutions. The cases discussed in this paper focus mainly on cities from both Syria and Egypt. This highlighting is done in regard to the nature of change, as mentioned above, the violent transformation in the case of Syrian cities and few cases in Egypt and the nonviolent transformation with the examples from Egypt.

In case of the Syrian cities the transformation is caused and sparked by the civil conflict, however the course of reconstruction of these cities after the conflict ends is argued to take one of three paths; reconstruction, renovation or redevelopment. While in case of the nonviolent transformation that is taking place already in Egypt, the nature of change was affected by political, social and security aspects, which in turn had direct impacts on the images of the Egyptian cities after the Arab Spring revolutions.

## 1. Introduction

The events of the Arab Spring Revolutions started in 2011 and took place in five countries in the Middle East, namely in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. The duration of the revolutions varied from one country to another, initially seeking regime change, most of these countries passed and are passing through a state of political instability that in some cases reached the stage of civil war as has been the case in Syria, Libya and Yemen. Following these revolutions, several transformations in the images of the Arab cities that hosted them took and are taking place. Such transformations vary from one city to another and in some cases from one situation to another within the same city. A general classification is

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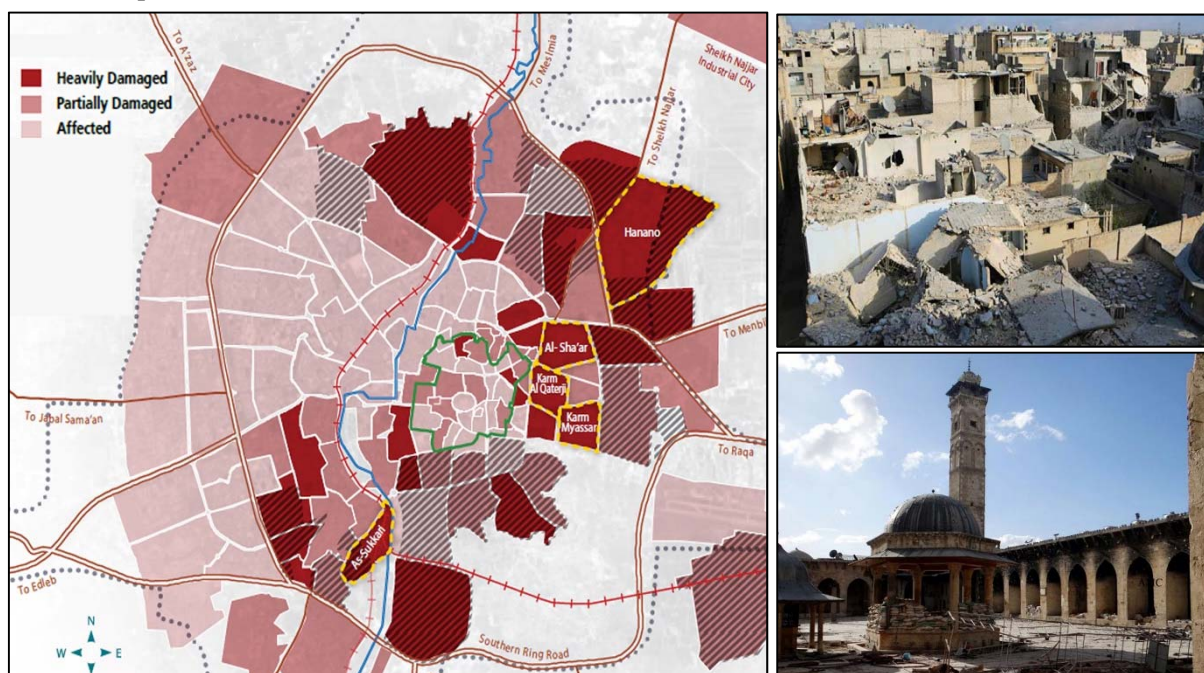
proposed to identify *transformations caused by violence* and *nonviolent transformations* to the image of the city.

This paper focuses mainly on cases from Syria representing the first category of transformation and cases from Egypt that represent both categories. The reasons for choosing these countries are: in the case of Syria, the author worked closely with several Syrian researchers on the topics of Urbicide and Post war reconstruction scenarios in some Syrian cities mainly the cities of Homs and Aleppo, accordingly driving some examples from these cities. As in the case of Egypt, the author witnessed most of the events that took place in Cairo and in Egypt since 2011, in addition to his academic and professional background in the field of urban planning and the impacts of politics on urbanism and urban spaces; accordingly, several examples are provided from Cairo, with possible references to other places.

The paper firstly reviews the Syrian examples that are related to the transformations caused by violence and discusses the possible scenarios of the post-war reconstruction scenarios and the potential impacts on the image of the city. It then reviews and analyses the Egyptian examples using first hand witnessed account as well as supporting literature on the cases and on similar international examples. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion on the classifications proposed.

## 2. Transformations cause by violence in Syrian cities

The Syrian version of the Arab Spring revolution started as well in 2011, but it gained critical momentum starting from 2012. What started as a revolution evolved into a civil armed conflict that is still ongoing in 2017. It is argued that many Syrian cities are subject to critical transformation because of the destruction that inflicted them. Such destruction can be classified as urbicide, or the so called deliberate destruction of cities [1]. According to Laue in her study on the case of Aleppo city, the city was subject to gradual destruction as a result of combats on the ground that led to the destruction of many parts of the city. This came in the form of collateral damage to many of its buildings and even entire neighbourhoods [2]. The situation in other Syrian cities is argued to be similar to that of Aleppo, in principle the level of damage caused to the cities by the ongoing armed conflict has already inflicted massive impacts on them.



**Figure 1.** (Right) The level of damage in districts of Aleppo city. (Left): damaged neighbourhood in Aleppo and the damaged caused to the Umayyad mosque in Aleppo. Source: UNHABITAT [3]

In terms of the image of the city, the question that is raised at this point is following: "how would the image of the city look like in the post-conflict time?". Kassouha in her investigation of potential post-conflict reconstruction strategies to be applied in Homs city, identified three possible scenarios: 1) reconstruct the city as a replica of its past, 2) renovate the remaining existing buildings of the city while relaying on the residents for self-building and 3) rebuild the city from scratch after demolishing what is left standing from its buildings. It is argued that the first scenario would be very difficult to realize as it requires enormous funding that will not be available for the state after the end of the conflict. However, it is possible that the second scenario might be possible, but the state will be unable to control the rebuilding and renovation process as this will be made mainly by the people. As for the third scenario, that is rebuilding the city from scratch. In this case, the city will be considered most likely an investment zone and set for reconstruction and rebuilding by the private sector, since the state is argued to be facing a stark economic crisis after several years of internal conflict [4].

Taking into consideration that there is a lot of similarities between the conflict in Syria and the civil war that took place in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990, there are a lot of arguments that the Lebanese reconstruction strategy implemented in Beirut, might as well be considered in the post-conflict reconstruction process of the Syrian cities.

The reconstruction of the downtown Beirut was mostly made by a private sector company "Solidaire". It is argued by Kassouha that despite some districts in the city kept most of their characteristics, several other districts were subject to the "Tabula Rasa" approach, which changed both the urban fabric and the historical characteristics of the city [4]. This approach could be called urbicidal urbanism in which a deliberate destruction of parts of the city took place, not as a result of conflict, but rather for the sake of redevelopment [3]. Several social complications were sustained as a result of such a process. In several cases the unphysical demarcation lines within the city that were set during the civil war, were kept within the conscience of the city residents.

According to AlJundi, in the post-war reconstruction process that was applied in Beirut, the preservation of the city character and memories from the pre-conflict and the conflict periods, was jeopardized in many districts. With the exception of some locations some remnants of the civil war were transformed into memorials, many of the physical structures that allow for remembering the city, as it once stood, do not exist anymore [5].

In general, it is argued that in the case of the Syrian cities, a change in the city image certainly took place. This change was caused by violent actions in the form of the ongoing armed conflict that led to a state of urbicide in the cities. It is postulated as well that a certain level of urbicidal planning and urbanism will most likely take place in the post-conflict reconstruction process, which will lead to a further change in the characteristics of the built environment. It is feared as well that such a change resulting from the reconstruction process should it be mainly carried out by the private sector or the people without proper state intervention, might lead to further social complications, as was the case in Beirut. Perhaps a more comprehensive way in dealing with the post-conflict reconstruction in the city is needed to avoid further social tensions as well as the impacts of the so called urbicidal urbanism.

There is also the factor of the "will" to accept what the cities in Syria have been through. In this case, an attempt will be made to preserve several iconic buildings during the reconstruction process. There is also a possibility that the general attitude during the reconstruction process, might attempt to erase the memories of the conflict years, by demolishing the buildings left from that period and building new structures.





**Figure 2.** (Above) The before and after urban fabric of Beirut with a significant change in the post-war urban fabric, that was subject to demolition and re-planning [4]. (Below): the traditional character in the city souqs (markets) before the war in contrast with the modern shopping malls that replaced them, [5].

This could be compared to post-war reconstruction process that took place in Germany after the Second World War, in cities like Dresden, where most of the historical character was restored, as well as in other cities, where attempts to impose modernistic plans and new city image and fabric were opposed by the people who decided to keep the original image. Yet, in some cities, new planning and construction replaced the older city image [6].

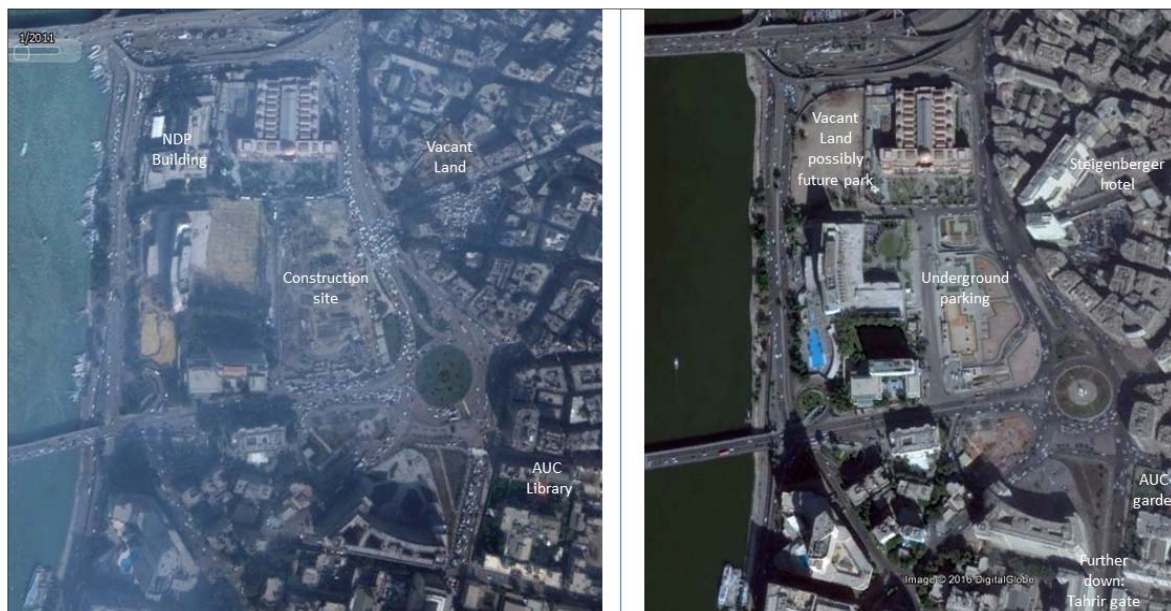
### 3. Transformations caused by Violence and nonviolent transformations in Cairo

It is argued that the brief period of violence that took place both during the January 2011 revolution and the June revolution 2013, sparked several transformation actions in between the two incidents and continued in the years that followed.

Looking mainly at the Cairo, its image is defined by its organization of spaces, its skyline and silhouette, its patterns and architectural styles of its buildings, as well as the forms of transportation and traffic flow lines within the city. Many of these elements were affected in Cairo because of the events that took place during and after the revolutions. Examples on the transformation of these elements are given from different locations in Cairo including Tahrir square, which hosted many of the mentioned events, as well as other examples from the city and from other locations in Egypt.

### 3.1. Changing the silhouette / skyline of Tahrir square

Tahrir square was the main icon and spatial representation of the January 2011 revolution. The square hosted the manifestations of the first revolution and later further manifestations and demonstrations that affected its spatial settings. Initially there were changes in the spatial settings and functions of the square, which hosted several political rallies and became a temporary arena for political debates [7]. Such transformations were temporary, as the initial usage of the square was restored. However, there were physical changes that took place in the square which led to a tangible transformation in its image and skyline. Some key changes took place in the square between the years 2011 and 2017, that directly impacted the image of this part of the city. The changes to be discussed in this paper are: the demolition of the National Democratic Party (NDP) building, the construction of Steigenberger hotel, and the gates to Tahrir square. There are of course other changes that took place in the square such as the construction of the underground garage and the landscaping on top of it, and the demolition of the library building of the American University in Cairo – Tahrir campus. The figure below illustrates the transformation of Tahrir square between 2011 and 2017.



**Figure 3.** The spatial and physical transformation of Tahrir square between 2011 - 2017.

Source: google earth with an adaptation by the author.

**3.1.1. Demolition of the National Democratic Party (NDP) Building** The NDP building was built in 1958 by architect Mahmoud Riad to host initially the headquarters of the Cairo Governorate then the Arab Socialist Union during President Nasser's era until the early 1970s. After his death and with President Sadat taking power, the building was converted into the main headquarters for the newly formed NDP [8]. The building was set in flames during the January 2011 revolution with the motives for this action still being speculated until present day. The building stood damaged for the next 4 years, and even witnessed the events of the second revolution in June 2013.



**Figure 4.** Left: The NDP building in 2015 during its demolition process. The old skyline of the river front and the square is still tangible. (source: taken by the author in June 2015). Right: The skyline of the river front in 2017 after the demolition of the building (RitzCarlton.com) and a view from Tahrir square without the NDP building (Pri.org)

What to come of the building was debatable between transforming it into a museum of the revolution, or demolishing it totally. The debate continued until 2015, however, the decision to demolish it and replace it with a public park was finally taken [9]. It is still debatable if the demolition was approved to erase the traces of the January revolution seeking to achieve a political agenda [8], or simply because it was no longer reusable or fixable, although this was also criticized by several experts who claim that the building was structurally adequate to sustain rehabilitation procedures [10]. Accordingly, one element that defined the profile of the city and the skyline of the central part of Cairo overlooking the Nile for 57 years was torn down. This of course made a change in the image of the city, which were sparked by the violent actions during the 2011 revolution. It is argued that possible political disputes, between opinions calling for erasing the memory of the NDP, or those arguing that this was done to erase the memory of the 2011 revolutions eventually led to the demolition of the building and eventually changing the image of the city.

*3.1.2 Construction of Steigenberger Hotel in Tahrir square* before the revolution, the site of the recently opened Steigenberger hotel was a vacant land used for car parking. Initially, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this site hosted Mrs. Hoda Shaarawy's villa.

The lady was one of the most influential feminist leaders in Egypt and well noted in the history of feminist movements. The villa was demolished and the site was used occasionally as a car parking area. During the 2011 revolution, the site was still vacant, however, in March 2013, slow construction works started to take place. Following the June 2013 revolution, the site gained even more significance as it overlooks the Tahrir square that hosted one of the main revolts of the Arab Spring revolutions.

The new hotel that is considered one of the tallest buildings in downtown Cairo, also contributed in changing the skyline of the city, which can be clearly seen in figure (5).



It is *argued that this is a nonviolent transformation* in the image of the city that is triggered by the events that took place in Tahrir square during the revolution. It is argued that such events gave it an overwhelming attractiveness and importance and led to the speeding up of the construction of such an important site that was left vacant for over four decades.



**Figure 5:** (Left) Hoda Sharaawy's Villa, circa 1920, source: Flickr.com Right: Steigenberger Hotel opened in 2017 in the same site, changing the skyline of Tahrir square, source: 360 cities

### 3.1.3 Gate to Tahrir Square

In the post 2011 revolution, Egypt witnessed a long period of political unrest that was manifested in the form of protests that occasionally turned violent. Since Tahrir square is very close to many governmental institutions and ministries in downtown Cairo, the government tended to introduce barricades that varied from simple barbed wires to building walls, with the aim of both dispersing potential protests and creating buffer zones around the public buildings [12]. The state of unrest continued throughout the rest of 2013 and 2014, and slowly faded away in the years to follow. Among the main walls that were erected in the downtown was a wall that blocked the entrance to Tahrir square from El Qasr El Einy Street. That wall remained in its place for almost three years, however in early 2014, the government replaced the wall blocking the street with a 3 metres tall iron gate that is usually open. This gate however, can be swiftly shut to block and control the entrance to Tahrir square, which is a questionable approach to control the access and flow to a specific part of the city. This replacement was seen by some as a way to slowly restore the normal nature of the square, by unblocking one of its main entrances, but on the other hand some might argue that this action of installing a gate contradicts the nature of a free democratic practice that was demanded during the resolutions [13]. It is argued that the emplacements of such gate, which for now does not seem to be removed soon, contributed in transforming the image of this part in Downtown Cairo. The perception of space, has changed to the sense of being controlled instead of that of a normal free movement.



**Figure 6.** Left: The wall erected to block the entrance to Tahrir square in 2012, after acquiring a touch of graffiti. Source: bbc.com. Right: The Iron Gate to Tahrir Square that replaced the wall in 2014.

Source: taken by the author in June 2015

The use of similar gates in other streets of Downtown Cairo leading to the governmental buildings is still tangible. Such gates replaced the temporary walls, which for some time, were considered one of the features of Downtown Cairo.

### *3.1.4 Concrete Blast Shields in Cairo*

In December 2013 and January 2014, two security headquarters in the Delta city of Mansoura city and in Cairo, were targeted by terrorist explosions. In both cases the two headquarters were either subject to explosives by a car bomb, or rammed over by an explosive vehicle. Such acts were repeated occasionally, and led to the installation of the concrete blast shields to surround the main security headquarters as well as important governmental institutions. The introduction of such shields was also accompanied by setting buffer zones in the form of “no trespassing zones” surrounding such buildings, while building high walls in the case of some police stations in Cairo [13].

In some cases, like in Nasr city in Cairo, the traffic direction was modified to allow for the installation of such concrete shields as well as creating the necessary buffer needed to secure the perimeter. Accordingly, in several locations in Cairo the perception and images of spaces were transformed slowly. It is argued that the transformation as such was triggered because of the violent actions. The installations made came out of fear from terrorist actions and in themselves are nonviolent measures responding to violent actions.

### *3.1.5 Demolition of Heritage and Historical buildings in Egyptian Cities*

During the 2011 and 2013 revolutions and events that followed them, several buildings of historical and heritage value were subject to attacks and sabotage. Such acts caused severe damages in these buildings, with the striking example of the NDP building, discussed earlier, that was later demolished. However, this section concerns mainly the buildings of historical and heritage values that were demolished in the years after and in between the revolutions, in nonviolent settings.



**Figure 7.** Left: Concrete blast shields installed next to the governmental buildings in downtown Cairo. Source: taken by the author in June 2015. Right: The blast shields are installed in other locations in Egypt in fear of possible terrorist attacks. Source: Masrawey.com

As discussed by Cairo Observer, Egypt was already losing its heritage buildings even before the Arab Spring revolutions, but rather on a slow pace. The reasons for that were either attributed to the ignorance of the heritage values and corruption within governmental sectors. At the same time, there were already some laws that prohibited the demolition of buildings of heritage and historical values and were associated with key political figures prior to 2011. The ban of demolishing heritage and historical buildings relaxed since there was no real comprehension of the preservation policy itself and was rather associated with key figures from the former regime. Consequently, several buildings were removed from



the demolition ban list and were demolished to allow for the construction of modern residential towers that would benefit its land owners. [14]. Such demolitions and reconstructions led to the transformation of the skyline in several districts of different Egyptian cities but most noticeably in Cairo and Alexandria. Such actions were non-violent actions, yet they were accelerated as a result of the revolutions that had taken place.



**Figure 8.** Part of the waterfront skyline in Alexandria, showing the original skyline (in dotted line) and the most recent transformed skyline in the foreground (in full line), which was accelerated after 2011

Several examples can be given, for example Alexandria with the change in the waterfront skyline in the years after 2011 in which several heritage buildings were demolished giving ways to the tall buildings or the high piles [15].

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

Transformations caused by violence and nonviolent transformations in the cities in Syria and Egypt are totally different from each other. The Syrian cities were subject to extreme violence and are highly ravaged by war. The Egyptian case witnessed far less levels of violence, however, because of the subsequent political events to the revolutions, some changes and transformations took place in its cities.

In the Syrian case, the discussion is about the future image of the cities in the post-conflict era, considering that several Syrian cities were devastated and destroyed during the conflict. There are several scenarios that will impact such future images and whether the intention will be to: replicate what was once existing, preserve some iconic elements and characteristics of the cities or ultimately replace the old ruins with newly planned cities. Several factors are argued to affect the choices made in the post-conflict reconstruction process. These factors include the type of funds offered for the reconstruction process, be that private or public, the political situation in the country as well as the people's will to choose how should their cities look like and whether they will tend to embrace their past or remove its traces within the new constructions. Such scenarios took place in other countries that witnessed large scale devastations such as Germany in the post-world war two construction process or in places of civil conflict such as Lebanon. The decisions made were affected by similar factors to those discussed above.

Despite the low levels of violence in the Egyptian case, violence was still responsible in triggering the spatial and physical changes in the cities. Most actions that were taken after the revolutions were non-violent, but they came as a response to other factors that were triggered by the revolutions and in some cases, were associated by violence. From the cases discussed the following classification can be made:

- nonviolent transformation that came as a consequence to a violent act and affected by the political environment in the country, such as the case of the NDP building demolition;
- nonviolent transformation that came as an investment action to reflect the increasing historical and cultural value of the place that witnessed the revolutions, such as the case of the Steigenberger hotel construction in Tahrir square;
- nonviolent transformation that came as a reaction to violent and terrorist actions and out of fear and precaution for similar future violent actions such as: the cases of the iron gate to Tahrir square, the concrete blast shields, and the creation of buffer zones and traffic detours close to important governmental buildings;
- nonviolent transformation, yet devastating to the city image in terms of the changing skylines as a result of constructing tall building to replace historical and heritage buildings. This action came as a result of relaxing the laws banning the demolition of such buildings. In some cases, the relaxation came as a result of the regime change and the ousting of the political figures to whom these laws were associated.

This paper discussed the transformations caused by violence and the nonviolent transformations that occurred in the cities of the Arab Spring Revolution, with a main emphasis on the cases from Syria and Egypt. The findings of this paper cannot be directly generalized to include other countries that witnessed the Arab Spring revolutions such as Yemen and Libya. A thorough investigation to the contextual settings and actions carried out during the revolutions should be analysed first to be able to identify the level of transformation that might occur in these cities.

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