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To cite this article: Taif Alkhudary (2022): 'We want a country': the urban politics of the October Revolution in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, Third World Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2022.2141219](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2141219)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2141219>



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Published online: 02 Dec 2022.



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'We want a country': the urban politics of the October Revolution in Baghdad's Tahrir Square

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I use Tahrir Square as a case study to examine the significance of space to Iraq's October Revolution. I draw on the work of Henri Lefebvre to argue that the revolution in Tahrir Square was a response to the degradation of space in Baghdad after 2003 and delineate how protesters used space tactically to alter the dynamics of contention in their favour. In addition, I suggest that despite the material space of the revolution coming to an end, protesters nevertheless saw what unfolded there as revolutionary because it allowed them to imagine politics anew for the first time since 2003. In this way, I contribute to work on social movements in the Middle East by highlighting the revolutionary potential of the imagination and centring protesters' understanding of it, therefore challenging academic norms about who gets to create theory. This has also allowed me to undertake a nuanced analysis of the events that unfolded in the square, as the focus on the imagination means that I do not need to claim that social relations changed beyond recognition to argue that something of lasting significance took place during Iraq's October Revolution.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 October 2021
Accepted 25 October 2022

KEYWORDS

Iraq
space
revolution
protest
Tahrir Square
Lefebvre

Although you might want to put up concrete blocks, making it difficult for just anyone to enter the Green Zone, we [see] you as politicians and all this destruction that we are living through outside the Green Zone [...] we can see you, all of you, as politicians, as ministers, as people who have participated in the destruction of this place, we can see you and know exactly what is going on [...] when I went on the 25th and I saw the people on the Turkish Restaurant, I smiled. I was really proud that we could see the government for real now, not just through art. We can see you for real, the people went out and they spoke.

Sajjad Abbas, August 2020

In 2013, Sajjad Abbas climbed to the top of a derelict building overlooking the Green Zone in Tahrir Square, central Baghdad. Abbas had spent the months previous negotiating with authorities trying to get permission to install an artwork on top of the building, which takes its name from the Turkish Restaurant that once occupied its top floor. Finally, by way of a contact, permission was granted, and Abbas set about installing his piece. He hung a white canvas depicting an eye and spray painted the words 'اگر اشوفك' meaning 'I can see you' on either side in the direction of the Green Zone. Abbas repeated the stunt in late 2019, when protestors calling for an overhaul of the post-2003 political system wrested control of the

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Turkish Restaurant from Iraqi security forces and paramilitaries. Implicit in Abbas' comments is a recognition that space is a constituent part of contentious politics. For him, the Green Zone, fortified by blast walls and checkpoints, is an exclusionary space that marks the difference between political elites and ordinary Iraqis, literally protecting the former from public scrutiny. He seems to say that it is only through taking over the Turkish Restaurant that this power dynamic was altered, turning the gaze back towards the government and allowing Iraqis to speak truth to power.

Most literature on urban space in Baghdad focuses on changes to the city's spatial layout because of the sectarian civil war that was sparked by the US-led invasion (Damluji 2010; Gregory 2008; Murrani 2016). Very rarely do discussions explicitly conceptualise and systematically probe the link between space in Baghdad and contentious politics (Sewell 2001). In this paper, I attempt to bridge this gap, using Tahrir Square as a case study through which to critically examine the role of space in Iraq's October Revolution. In this way, I extend work on space in Baghdad and make a two-fold contribution to the literature on social movements in the Middle East. Firstly, I take an intersectional approach to the analysis of the October Revolution, moving beyond the tendency to rely on strict binaries when examining revolutionary change. Secondly, by centring protesters' views on revolution, I challenge the tendency to theorise revolution in material terms.

I begin by undertaking a literature review of the dominant ways that space is theorised in work on the Egyptian revolution, before outlining my theoretical framework. In the following three sections, I delineate my main arguments. I begin by showing that the degradation of space in Baghdad after 2003 was a key trigger of the October Revolution in Tahrir Square. Next, I demonstrate that protesters used the space of Tahrir tactically to alter the dynamics of contention in their favour. Finally, I argue that despite the material space of Tahrir coming to an end, it was nevertheless revolutionary for protesters because it allowed them to imagine politics and social processes anew for the first time since regime change.

The arguments presented in this paper are based on several visits to Tahrir Square in December 2019, a review of secondary literature, a workshop meant to give space to protesters to reflect on their experiences of the demonstrations, and semi-structured interviews carried out with protesters in Arabic in July and August 2020. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, both the workshop and the interviews were carried out online. Further interviews were then carried out in Baghdad in May 2022. Most activists who were interviewed for this paper and who participated in the workshop were from middle-class backgrounds and educated to at least the undergraduate level. While this limits the scope of the findings of this paper, it does not necessarily mean that it is unrepresentative of the broader protest movement. This is because, if nothing else, all interviewees were either unemployed or underemployed, something which united them with most protesters in Tahrir and across Iraq. Special attention was also paid to ensuring that an equal number of women and men were interviewed. Interviewees were primarily chosen based on accessibility, and snowball sampling was used to gain access to additional interviewees.

I situate this paper's arguments within the literature on the role of space in the Arab Uprisings, with a particular focus on the Egyptian Revolution, due to the similarities between what unfolded in Tahrir Square in Cairo and in Baghdad eight years later. While Baghdad's Tahrir Square was not the only space of significance to the Iraqi protest movement, I chose to use it as my case study in this paper as it was the most accessible protest square to me as an Iraqi woman living abroad whose access to the protests was facilitated by friends and

family in the capital. My positionality also worked to limit the spaces I could access in Tahrir, with some spaces and topics deemed by my interlocuters as too dangerous or 'inappropriate' for me to visit or discuss as a woman. Moreover, Tahrir Square arguably became the most prominent symbol of the October Revolution. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine how urban politics unfolded in other areas, the focus on Tahrir Square should not discount their importance to the revolution.

Tahrir Squares past

Much of the work on Tahrir Square in Cairo focuses on material changes to the square. Some scholars contend that during the revolution space was used tactically to transform it from a traffic hub into a gathering place representative of a new political order (Gunning and Zvi Baron 2013; Ramadan 2013; Rabbat 2011; Riphagen and Woltering 2018). This saw a change in social relations and the articulation of protesters' values as opposed to those of the Egyptian government. These values manifested themselves in the way that class-, gender- and sect-based divisions were transcended in the square (Attia 2011; Gunning and Zvi Baron 2013; Riphagen and Woltering 2018). For Wladimir Riphagen and Robert A. F. L. Woltering, the shift from socialist politics under Gamal Abdul Nasser to increasingly neo-liberal policies under Anwar Al Sadat and Hosni Mubarak created an 'urban social division', with wealthy Egyptians living in newly constructed satellite cities while the poor lived in the city centre (2018, 122). Thus, for them during the Egyptian revolution, a 'counter-space' was created in Tahrir Square through the coming together of Egyptians of different classes for a common cause (124). For others, such as Jeroen Gunning and Ilan Zvi Baron, in the square 'sectarian tensions [were] suspended' and 'relations between men and women, between veiled and unveiled changed' (2013, 253). Another group of scholars have emphasised the embodied nature of the new space, performed through the mass gathering of bodies (Butler 2011; Gregory 2013; Tripp 2013).

The focus on the materiality of protest spaces within the literature on Tahrir Square means that sometimes scholars cannot decide if the events that unfolded there can be called 'revolutionary'. For example, for Gunning and Zvi Baron what was 'truly revolutionary' about Tahrir was that protesters created a participatory and devolved self-government (2013, 242). In the same text, however, they also argue that because the changes to the square were temporary and did not result in a 'full scale social revolution' they only 'border[ed] on a revolution' (255). This also means that there is a pessimism in some of the literature about the state of space in Cairo's Tahrir Square following its demobilisation. For example, Riphagen and A. F. L. Woltering write that what was left in the wake of the revolution was an 'empty space' – that is, 'a revolution suppressed, defeated or betrayed, a revolution that has left nothing behind, that changed nothing, that has come to nothing' (2018, 129).

By drawing on literature on the role of space in the Egyptian revolution and applying this to the case study of Tahrir Square in Baghdad, I find significant similarities. I use Deborah G. Martin and Bryon Miller's (2003) development of the notion of 'environmental mechanisms' to argue that Tahrir Square in Baghdad also saw the tactical use of space by protesters to outmanoeuvre the authorities. In addition, I show that the events that unfolded in Baghdad were a response to increased inequalities as made manifest in the city's urban environment.

Finally, I draw on Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad to demonstrate that protesters created a 'new space' which was revolutionary in his sense of the term.

However, the case study of Tahrir Square in Baghdad also reveals that prior literature which saw gatherings in Tahrir Square in Cairo as a moment of revolutionary coming together were based on overtly rigid gender, class, and sectarian dichotomies. Secondly, I move away from the tendency to theorise revolution in material terms by centring protesters' understanding that what was revolutionary about Tahrir was that it allowed them to imagine politics anew and raised political consciousness among Iraqis. In this way I heed Maya Mikdashi's call to ground revolution in the experiences and understanding of protesters, challenging the tendency to measure uprisings in the Middle East according to the frameworks of the Euro-American academy (Schwedler 2019). This is significant because it challenges academic norms about who can create theory. If, as I suggest, the revolutionary potential of Tahrir lies in the imagination, then methodologically the interviews and workshop carried out as part of the research for this paper had transformative potential insofar as they reinforced protesters' belief that something of lasting significance had taken place and gave them space to reflect on why this was the case.

Theoretical framework

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that space is a social product that both enables and produces social action and is affected by it (1991, 26). Space allows people to act in pioneering ways and to change the structures that enabled their actions in the first instance (Sewell 2001, 55). To put it another way, space does not merely contain activism, but rather is constitutive of it and structures social relations, such as gender, race and class identities (Martin and Miller 2003, 144–145). To change space, then, is to also potentially alter how those relations play out.

For Lefebvre, socio-political grievances are inscribed in space and made apparent through discrepancies between spaces of elites and ordinary inhabitants. In other words, people make sense of inequalities through the ways that they play out in their daily lives. They are inscribed in the substandard housing and inadequate resource allocation of poorer neighbourhoods, in contrast to the luxurious houses, gated communities, security apparatuses and well-resourced schools of affluent neighbourhoods. According to Lefebvre, contradictions in space like these, which are experienced by individuals daily, can be the launching off point for contention.

Building on the idea that space both conditions and enables contentious politics, Martin and Miller have suggested that it is worth considering 'how mechanisms and processes of contention play out in historical and spatial contexts' (2003, 152). They look at 'environmental mechanisms', arguing that mechanisms and processes of contention always involve a struggle over the spatial components of social, political and economic relations (150). To block, enhance or alter access to these components, whether resources, political allies or information, not only changes how they operate but also alters the dynamics of contention. As such, it is important to examine how space is used as part and parcel of the tactics employed by protesters.

Lefebvre identifies three ways in which space may be experienced, which are useful for thinking about the relationship between space and contentious politics. Perceived space is

seen from the outside rather than lived (Gunning and Zvi Baron 2013, 247). It reproduces dominant social relations, including those of the family and class, how individuals live, their daily routines, spatial inclusions and exclusions, and what practices are associated with certain spaces. Conceived space is 'the space of scientists, urbanists, technocrats, subdividers and social engineers' (Lefebvre 1991, 38). It is 'linked to the relations of production and the order which these relations impose' (Gunning and Zvi Baron 2013, 247). Finally, lived space is 'directly lived through its associated images and symbols and is the space of "inhabitants" and "users"' (Lefebvre 1991, 39). This space is 'dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate' (39).

Thus, for Lefebvre space is on the one hand a tool for dominance and control, a means through which 'the dominant form of space – that of the centres of wealth and power, endeavours to mould the spaces it dominates (ie peripheral spaces), and it seeks, often by violent means, to reduce the obstacles and resistance it encounters there' (49). And, on the other hand, it contains emancipatory potential, with lived space being particularly susceptible to transformation.

Furthermore, for Lefebvre a revolution only reaches its full potential by producing a new space. For him, 'a social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and space – though its impact need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas' (54). It is possible, however, that the revolutionary period only works to establish the pre-conditions for a new space and that for it to actually come into being requires a longer time period.

Contradictions in space

Following the US-led invasion, urban spaces in Baghdad begin to deteriorate due to corruption, privatisation and instability, resulting in increased inequalities. This had already begun during the sanctions period, with cuts to public spending resulting in a deterioration in basic infrastructure in Baghdad. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the pre-2003 period, I argue in this section that after the invasion everyday living conditions in Baghdad deteriorated to such an extent that they became unbearable, pushing residents to protest (Sirri 2020a). I begin by examining the division of Baghdad across sectarian lines during the civil war, before moving on to discuss how the political elite sought to counter these divisions through the promotion of 'market citizenship'.

Baghdad: the divided city par excellence

Post-invasion, a new political system known as *Al Muhasasa Al Taifia* was implemented by the US and formerly exiled Iraqi politicians. This saw the distribution of cabinet and parliamentary seats according to the sect or ethnic identity of incumbents in direct proportion to a preconceived idea of the percentage of Iraqis belonging to each group (Dodge 2018). *Al Muhasasa's* placement of sectarianism at the heart of government, coupled with the loss of the state's monopoly on violence, led to the emergence of what Zahra Ali describes in this special issue as a post-invasion political order made up of 'war machines'. Achille Mbembe (2003) has argued that Foucault's notion of biopower, whereby sovereignty is defined in terms of a monopoly over who gets to live and who dies, is insufficient to describe the

post-colonial state. Rather, in the post-colony 'a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights to rule emerge, inextricably superimposed and tangled, in which different *de facto* juridical instances are geographically interwoven and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties, and enclaves abound' (31). Mbembe characterises these competing groups in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'war machines', which can have multiple functions including the ability to work as both political organisations and mercenaries. They are prone to splitting up or merging depending on the tasks and circumstances they find themselves in and are above all 'characterised by the capacity for metamorphosis' (31). Viewed through this lens, it can be argued that the Iraqi state after 2003 is made up of different groups which are constantly metamorphosing by merging together or breaking apart, depending on the coalition that will give them the competitive edge in their clamour for state resources.

Toby Dodge has argued that one of the central drivers of sectarian violence after 2003 was competition between different entities vying for a stake in the new political settlement (2012, 53–74). This violence was concentrated predominantly in Baghdad, which by May 2005 was in the midst of civil war. This resulted in substantial demographic shifts, with a formerly mixed city being divided along ethnic and religious lines, meaning that by 2007 Baghdad became a Shia majority city (Gregory 2008, 14).

In response to increased sectarian violence, in February 2007 the US began implementing its counter-insurgency plan, 'Operation Imposing the Law', across Baghdad. US forces installed concrete blocks around Sunni neighbourhoods to prevent insurgents from launching attacks from them into Shia neighbourhoods (Gregory 2008, 34). Failing this, the checkpoints that controlled who was allowed to move through these enclaves were meant to prevent Shia militias from entering Sunni areas and launching retaliatory attacks (34–35). However, by creating homogeneous enclaves the strategy only exacerbated the sectarianisation of the city and increased religious cleansing, hardening and fixing the reorganisation of Baghdad along sectarian lines. It also led to an increase in hardship and humiliation, confining Iraqis to their neighbourhoods, and movement through the city was now conducted along sectarian lines (37).

Much of the security infrastructure installed during the civil war remains in place today. This is particularly true of checkpoints at the entrances of different areas and the T walls, and security around the Green Zone. While this infrastructure continues to condition movement around the city, boundaries have become much more permeable, with infrastructure increasing or decreasing depending on the security situation (Sirri 2020c).

The privatisation of peace

While space was becoming increasingly fragmented, the Occupation Authority, and later the International Monetary Fund under its Emergency Post-Conflict Assistance Programme, set into motion a series of neo-liberal policies meant to transform Iraq into a 'market economy' (Raad 2015). They included setting corporate tax at a flat rate of 15%, permitting foreign investment in all sectors of the Iraqi economy, apart from natural resources, and allowing investors to own 100% of Iraqi assets and take all profits from their investments without an obligation to reinvest or to pay taxes (Klein 2007a, 345).

Nagle (2017) has argued that often in divided post-war cities, where the authorities are unable to provide public services, there is an attempt to achieve 'development' and stability

through strong neo-liberal institutions. According to Nagle, this is supposed to encourage 'market citizenship', whereby citizens abandon ethnic or sectarian affiliations and instead take up the values of possessive individualism. However, the drive towards 'capitalist peace' only creates new forms of exclusion and empowers 'sectarian elites and warlords to degrade public goods and capture, via clientelism and corruption, economic and political institutions' (149–150). Nagle's description of the 'privatisation of peace' describes the second major trend that shaped Baghdad's landscape following the US-led invasion.

Furthermore, corruption surged under the post-2003 political settlement. As Dodge describes in this special issue, under the *Muhasasa* system, ministries and their resources are distributed among winning parties after each election. To have access to the largest share of resources possible, political parties behave like war machines, constantly metamorphosing, creating new allegiances or relinquishing existing loyalties to achieve the upper hand during post-election negotiations. This means that Baghdad has been left without a 'conceived space' beyond security infrastructure. In other words, no steps have been taken towards dealing with the infrastructural destruction caused by the invasion or the sectarian war. Rather, as Ali argues in this special issue, the population has been left to live in 'death worlds', characterised by social conditions in which they live as if they were dead, while the political and business elites benefit at their expense.

Corruption in reconstruction contracts means that public money is routinely invested in companies owned by politicians and their associates, with projects never completed (Dodge 2019). Complaints about lack of delivery are ignored, as it is often the same minister who awarded the contract who benefits financially from the project's lack of completion. Moreover, contract corruption remains a major issue with companies awarded contracts without a competitive tender and the sums of contracts paid in cash, in advance of any work being carried out and without proper documentation (Al Ali 2014; Al Bayan News 2005). Consequently, residents of Baghdad are regularly left without electricity, they do not have access to clean water and a lack of adequate housing has led millions of people to resort to living in informal settlements.

The degradation of space in Baghdad has been coupled with a construction boom, predominantly centred around building shopping malls and residential complexes. Such developments have only worked to widen the gap between rich and poor, as access to them is dependent on access to capital. Ultimately, it is also those with political ties who benefit from such projects, as they bribe and threaten their way into obtaining landownership documents and land leases at a lower rate than the market value, with profits making their way to the political elite through party donations (Sirri 2020b).

The protests in Tahrir Square were a response to the degradation of Baghdad's urban environment after 2003. This is apparent from the infrastructural changes that protesters made to Tahrir Square, as well as their efforts to clean up and revive the space. Protesters set up tents to house demonstrators, medical treatment facilities, legal support stations, a TV station, a mock court to try corrupt politicians, food stands, hairdressers, and a laundry service. Protesters also undertook a clean-up programme, with coordinated teams working to clean the Turkish Restaurant and the underpass under Tahrir Square. They also installed electricity in the Turkish restaurant and built sanitation facilities. Moreover, demonstrators undertook creative activities, setting up cinemas and theatres, and even created a beach on the banks of the Tigris and filled it with deck chairs, a football ground, fountains, and an

outdoor gym. Artists flocked to Tahrir, filling the tunnel that runs under it, the Turkish Restaurant, and Al Rasheed Street with graffiti and murals. In this way, they reclaimed their 'right to the city', a common right centred around the ability to change oneself through a collective transformation of the process of urbanisation to meet the values and desires of the populace (Harvey 2008).

Moreover, for protesters, the fact that they were able to revive Tahrir Square and provide services to the area within such a short period highlighted the extent of government dysfunction in contrast to the innovativeness of Iraqi youth. As one protestor put it:

the tunnel and the Square were made beautiful during a week or two. If this were up to the government, just painting a sidewalk would take six months' (author's interview, August 2020). For another, it was sending a message to the government 'that we can do anything ... you stole ... you did all these things ... but between us, we helped each other, and we created a beautiful place. (author's interview, August 2020)

In this way, protesters challenged the neo-liberal individualism inscribed in Baghdad's public spaces by working together to create an urban space from below. In other words, they altered the conceived space of Tahrir, countering the wilful neglect and privatisation of public space by the political elite that had led to its degradation.

The conflict between the interests of the political elite and ordinary Baghdadis is heightened in Tahrir Square due to its proximity to the Green Zone. Lefebvre has argued that the tendency to create centres of decision-making, which concentrate government institutions in one place, results in spatial shortages that bring into sharp relief the abundance of those in power in contrast to the 'reigning scarcity' experienced by those outside of these centres (1991, 333–334). This contrast is what Naomi Klein describes in her essay 'Disaster Capitalism' (2007b), where she sees an insurmountable partition between life in the Green Zone and the rest of Baghdad. Klein describes an enclave with 'its own electrical grid, its own phone and sanitation systems, its own oil supply, and its own state-of-the-art hospital pristine with operating theatres – all protected by walls five meters thick' (48). This stands at the centre of 'the boiling Red Zone that is Iraq, where you could get shot just for standing too close to the walls of the Green Zone. For Klein, the Green Zone is the archetypal example of the privatisation of disaster responses, whereby the idea of public good is erased and divisions that are made to seem natural are created between rich and poor.

Lefebvre maps a continuity between attempts at totalising 'control' of space, the 'contradictions' this engenders, and 'possibilities' it brings into being (as cited in Soja 1996, 70). When applied to our present case study, Lefebvre's 'trialectic' might be thought about in terms of the Green Zone, the Red Zone, and the creative interventions that they inspire in protestors. This is what Sajjad seems to recognise in this article's opening quote. For him, Tahrir's Square's location extenuates the contrast between the Green Zone as a space of pomp, luxury and excess, in comparison to the hardships that Iraqis must endure as a result of its creation. However, it is also in this contrast between the two spaces that he sees an opportunity to mount a challenge to the government. This recognition seemed to be shared by protesters more broadly, as one of their key mantras was 'the voices of the poor at the gates of the Green Zone'. The slogan brings into sharp relief the stark inequalities between the elites inside the Green Zone and those protesting outside it, as highlighted by the contradictions in the two spaces.

Spatial tactics

If, as I have argued, protesters' grievances are figured in Baghdad's urban environment, then changing that space might also change the dynamics of contention. I am interested in how protesters blocked war machines' access to the Square and in so doing were able, to some extent, to combat the violence they faced.

The violence used against protesters in Tahrir Square is characterised by war machines coming together to attack demonstrators in different ways. For example, anti-riot police threw military-grade tear gas canisters directly at protesters, resulting in fatal head injuries (Amnesty International 2019a). Paramilitary groups, many of whom had already existed as separate entities during the sectarian civil war, also attacked demonstrators. As Renad Mansour argues in this special issue, they later joined together to form a network of armed groups known as *Al Hashd Al Shabi* to fight against Daesh's insurrection. In 2018 leaders affiliated with these groups ran in and won the elections, giving them access to ministries and their resources. This politicisation of the militia groups worked to 'coup-proof' the political system (Kiyani 2022), meaning that they staunchly defended it against demonstrators because their stakes in it increased. Consequently, they used marksmen who shot to kill protesters (Reuters Staff 2019), carried out assassinations, and forcibly disappeared others (Amnesty International 2019b). Despite the distinctiveness of the tactics used by the different groups, the similarity of attacks across different sites across Iraq suggests that they were coordinated (Mansour 2019; Abadi 2020). In other words, there was a willingness by war machines to cooperate and create different forms of allegiances to exercise maximum repression and safeguard their interests in the political system.

Protesters' decision to gather at Tahrir Square was a deliberate tactic aimed at minimising risk (author's interview, August 2020). As a central point in the city, which is surrounded by at least four main bus stations, it is easy for people across Baghdad and in the provinces to reach the Square. After the creation of the Green Zone, which closed off part of the 14 Tamuz bridge, Tahrir became a key transit point. This means that instead of driving straight through the Green Zone to get from one side of the city to the other, commuters must travel around the Green Zone and connect with other parts of the city from in and around Tahrir Square. In addition, while there are many squares along the Tigris and opposite the Green Zone in which protestors could have chosen to congregate, security on Al Jumhuriyah Bridge is less stringent than at other entrances as it is the entrance farthest away from the US embassy. The lack of tight security and the fact that it is the only entrance not on a highway meant that protesters were drawn to this area as it was a convenient meeting place and seemingly less dangerous than other locations close to the Green Zone.

Protesters also made strategic use of sites on the Square itself, blocking war machines' access to key tactical spaces. For example, the Turkish Restaurant which had been used since 2011 to attack and monitor protest activity in the Square was taken over by hundreds of protesters. This not only made it more difficult for snipers to shoot at protesters but also gave them a view of Al Jumhuriyah bridge, allowing them to see when anti-riot police were advancing into the Square and giving them ample time to flood the area to protect it. Protesters stationed in the building also developed warning signals, turning their phone flashes on to signal that the square was safe or turning them off to signal that it was being attacked (author's interview, August 2020). Occupying new strategic spaces altered the

dynamics of contention, giving protesters a renewed sense of confidence and encouraging them to continue occupying the square (author's interview with protester, August 2020).

Another point of contestation across Baghdad was the bridges linking the eastern side of the city to the Green Zone on its western bank (DW 2019). Anti-riot police stationed at Al Jumhuriyah bridge heavily targeted protesters stationed on a neglected piece of land on the banks of the Tigris River. To combat this, protestors altered the function of the space. As one protestor put it:

We thought about changing this place into a place of leisure, when the protesters and the government see that it is a place of leisure, they stop attacking each other. We made a beach like any beach you might see in any other country in the world, we put up umbrellas and Shishas and so on. When families and children came every morning, they went to Tahrir Beach. When the government sees families on the beach, it is impossible that they will attack this place. (author's interview, August 2020)

Thus, it is through altering the spatial constitution of the banks of the Tigris River – a place that had long been neglected and deprived of any 'conception' in Lefebvre's sense of the term – that protesters also altered the power relations between government forces and demonstrators and changed the dynamics of contention to their advantage.

In addition, protesters blocked some bridges across the city and tried to cross others, as a means of altering who had access to government resources. In Tahrir Square, demonstrators attempted to overpower riot police who closed off Al Jumhuriyah Bridge and to enter the Green Zone. In this way, they prevented civil servants and other government workers, whose admission into the Green Zone is based on political party affiliation, from accessing state resources. This is not only representative of protesters' disillusionment with the state, but also an attempt to challenge their exclusion from decision-making by bringing the government to a standstill.

The struggle over the spatial configuration of socio-economic and political relations in Baghdad also played out in the city's 'lived space', as was evidenced by the murals and graffiti across the walls of Tahrir and surrounding areas. The murals allowed protesters to make their opinions heard, and to establish different uses and understandings of space in direct contrast to the hegemonic spaces created by war machines. As political and armed groups began to control different areas and real estate in Baghdad, they became important sources of revenue and they demanded cuts from construction contracts and fees for the supply of public services (Tripp 2007). Thus, control of territory not only represented their physical power but also allowed them to provide housing, employment, and financial benefits to their followers (Sirri 2019). The murals on the walls across Tahrir, then, were a way of articulating myriad opinions and reclaiming spaces that had fallen under the *de facto* control of war machines.

The revolutionary potential of the imagination

The demonstrators on Tahrir Square produced a counter space by changing the lived and perceived space in the area, including altering the practices and social relations within it. In this way, they created a new space that was evidenced both in the material changes to the Square and on the level of the imagination – that is, in the feelings it engendered in protesters and the possibilities it allowed them to imagine. This space is akin to what Edward Soja (1996) has

described as 'thirding as other'. He argues that through his spatial triad, Lefebvre attempts to go beyond binaries and to think of space in both material and imagined terms at once, that is as simultaneously 'real and imagined' (10–11; 60–61). This space is radically egalitarian and refuses any kind of closure or the imposition of a singular vision at the expense of other possibilities.

For protesters, Tahrir became a 'mini country' where they created 'everything they ever dreamed of' (author's interviews, August 2020). This idealised view of Tahrir was figured in the most popular mantra among protestors: 'we want a country', one capable of providing public services, employment and an end to corruption. It was also apparent in their aims in occupying the space: 'we went out to show people what a people means, what democracy means, what government means and what a country means' (author's interview, August 2020). Protestors changed the lived space of Tahrir Square, imbuing it with symbolism that meant that it came to represent an idealised vision of what Iraq could be. For example, the beach created in Tahrir became a place of leisure for Iraqi youth and represented their aspirations. As one protestor put it:

There is this place which is made of sand on the river which has been here for decades, but no one ever thought to go there and put up a few umbrellas and a few simple things and make it into a nice small beach. We don't have tourist locations here in Baghdad, so it was a message that as youth we are peaceful, it is not that we want to destroy the areas or streets, we want to give you an example of the kind of thing we want in the future in Baghdad, you can make a beach like this as a government and as a system. (author's interview, August 2020)

The lack of such spaces is so pronounced in the city, that another protestor said when speaking about the heyday of the Turkish Restaurant they were 'surprised to hear that there was something that was ever alive in Baghdad' (author's interview, August 2020). Both protesters seem to be acutely aware of the absence of a conceived space in Baghdad due to privatisation and the neglect of public spaces because of corruption and war machines' control over them. In this context, protesters reimagined the lived space of Tahrir as a way of showing the political elite what it could be under a more egalitarian political order.

Moreover, Tahrir Square represented unlimited freedom and an opportunity for Iraqis to express themselves like never before:

When I went there it was the first time that there was a feeling that you were demanding your rights and that you were free. There was nothing that could stop you. There was an atmosphere of excitement, of energy, that it was possible that something would happen, that something is going to change. It was as if someone was suffocating and he exploded and started screaming ... people who had been silent ... there was no one who could control me ... all the restrictions broke ... this person exists inside every Iraqi ... there are people inside this person. They want to live, but they can't live. So, they exploded and expressed what was really inside them. (author's interview, August 2020)

The protester's visceral description, of a person suffocated so violently that when the opportunity arose for them to breathe they exploded, is indicative of the deluge of possibilities that demonstrators projected onto Tahrir. In this way, changes to the conceived space of Tahrir enabled protests to create a new lived space that felt like it was saturated with opportunities that had not existed previously and which allowed them to 'live' for the first time. Here, Soja's notion of the 'real and imagined' is crucial, because in the actual material space of Tahrir, protesters were being systematically killed. This stands in stark contrast to what they chose to highlight when describing their experiences in the Square.

Nagle has argued that in divided cities, public spaces allow for chance encounters and can, with time, make boundaries more porous, even erasing the fear of the 'other' (2020, 4). Public spaces can also become spaces of dialogue and debate, where those with conflicting identities and interests might come together to establish shared political projects and aspirations. The protests in Tahrir Square brought together people from different social groups in ways that have not been seen in prior demonstrations in Iraq. However, more than being just a singular constitutive moment of shared encounter, they worked to affirm that boundaries in divided cities are always already permeable.

The previous instance of mass demonstrations in Iraq took place in 2015 and was led by the middle classes (Al Hamoud 2017; Ali 2019; Majed 2020). In contrast, the 2019 protests saw a huge influx of working-class demonstrators due to the razing of informal settlements which house 3.2 million people in Iraq, including a large proportion of the residents of Sadr city a large proportion of demonstrators in Baghdad (Al Madah 2021; Rubin 2019). In addition, the number of people who participated in the protests rose significantly, with over one million people repeatedly taking to the streets of the capital in 2019. Arguably, both the demographic shift and the rise in numbers of protesters were influenced by what Bishara (2015) refers to as the 'politics of ignoring', in which the political elites' strategy of ignoring protesters' demands over time led to increased humiliation of the populace. Under the 'privatisation of peace' and increasingly neo-liberal policies which have allowed war machines to further degrade public services, lower income residents have resorted to 'quiet encroachment', advancing on the interests of the powerful and bettering their lot through illegally taking over public lands (Bayat 2013, 56). Thus, when their gains were threatened through the razing of informal settlements they turned to collective action (Bayat 2013, 58). In this way, there was a change to the perceived space of Tahrir from one previously populated by largely middle-class protesters to one that encompassed a broader class stratum. However, to some extent this crossover has always existed because the areas around Tahrir include a mixture of residential housing for lower-income families, commercial businesses and markets, where the city's middle-class residents shop for goods, and hotels frequented by international workers. However, within the context of the revolution, this mixing became more pronounced, with lower-income people uniting with their middle-class counterparts to make themselves heard in a space where their defiance of the authorities is usually a survival strategy and not an intentional political act.

The changes to the perceived space of Tahrir Square were also evident in the way that protests challenged patriarchal gender norms. Women and girls reported feeling safe enough to frequent areas in and around Tahrir that they are usually expected to avoid due to them being male-dominated spaces and their association with sex work and alcohol (author's interview with protester, August 2020). They also defied orders from their parents and teachers by going on strike from schools and universities to attend protests. Moreover, in contrast to the rest of Baghdad where street harassment is a daily reality, there were no such cases reported in Tahrir. As a woman protester put it:

[When] a gas canister landed near me, more than one person took care of me and washed my eyes as if he has known me for a long time, not as if I was a stranger to him. He wasn't doing it to try to harass me, he was trying to help. This is something I haven't seen before. It was as if he was someone who forgot himself when caring for me. As if each soul was just there to serve the other. (author's interview, August 2020)

The protester describes a change to the perceived space of Tahrir characterised by a new sense of community, as exemplified by the fact that rather than making a pass at her when she was most vulnerable, the men in her story assisted her to safety.

However, it is also worth considering what privileges one must have to be able to partake in a revolution (Winegar 2012). For the most part, the women who participated in the protests were those of middle-class backgrounds, who were mobile and had access to independent incomes. Moreover, in contrast to the sense of belonging protesters felt among each other, war machines used women's participation in the demonstrations to provoke 'moral panic', denying them the possibility of being political subjects (Amar 2013, 217–218). They did this by directly targeting women protesters, including through forcibly disappearing them as was the case with demonstrator Mary Mohammed who was kidnapped by a paramilitary group, held at gunpoint, and forced to record a video falsely admitting to having had an affair with a member of parliament (Sirwan 2020). In this way, war machines attempted to restore patriarchal gender norms by substituting moral concerns for political ones and implying that no 'respectable woman' would participate in protests (Amar 2013, 219).

The final way that the perceived space in Tahrir Square was altered was through the challenge it posed to the sectarian divisions that had characterised space in Baghdad since 2003. As one protester described:

There were no differences in the Square [...] No one asked you who you were or where you are from. At the time we were living amid death. There were people who treated the wounded youth and those who shared facemasks. I can't ask what this person's identity is. This doesn't concern me. It doesn't come to mind for me to ask them, this is not important to me. This was the perspective of all protesters. (author's interview, August 2020)

The protester describes how sectarian tensions entrenched through the post-2003 political system were erased in the space of Tahrir, as demonstrators pulled together as Iraqis in an attempt to survive the violence of war machines. These tensions had been figured spatially in the way that the only 'conceived space' in Baghdad was that of the security infrastructure, which had worked to separate Iraqis from each other based on their sect or ethnic group. This is something that Iraqis had long challenged in their everyday lives, where even amid civil war they found innovative ways to move through space to visit and support friends and family of other sects and ethnicities (Damluji 2010, 79).

It was also the violence deployed against protesters by war machines that brought the material space created in Tahrir to an end. Following the assassinations of Major General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis, deputy head of *Al Hashd Al Shabi*, by a US drone strike in Baghdad, paramilitary leader and cleric Moqtada Al Sadr called for a 'million-man march' against US presence in Iraq. This saw his supporters take to Tahrir Square and surrounding areas, literally displacing protesters from their site. His followers then went on to force protesters out of the Turkish Restaurant, and political parties and criminal gangs began to send their supporters to Tahrir to pitch their own tents, taking over the space and forcing 'real' protesters out through violence and sabotage (author's interview, August 2020).

Despite this, according to protesters the events that unfolded in Tahrir Square can nevertheless be deemed revolutionary. For them, the end of the material space of Tahrir did not mark an 'empty space' or a 'revolution suppressed that had left nothing behind', to paraphrase Riphagen and Waltering. Indeed, David Graeber has argued that revolutionaries

'break existing frames to create new horizons of possibility, an act that then allows a radical restructuring of the social imagination' (2012, 61). This is recognised by many activists, who see the ultimate achievement of the October Revolution as having given rise to a new political consciousness and critical understanding that had not existed before. This is perhaps what Sajjad meant when he describes at the beginning of this paper how the October Revolution allowed people 'to see the government for real now'. In other words, the experiments on Tahrir Square allowed protesters to take back the political reins from the elites who have dictated what politics could be since 2003 and to imagine it anew. They challenged the idea that there is a natural order on which politics and society are based and reminded Iraqis that there are always different choices that can be made (Mouffe 2011). In this way, protesters seemed to envisage the space of Tahrir as 'realandimagined', using the material space of the Square to imagine possibilities for a more egalitarian Iraq.

Tahrir Squares Future

Since protests have ended there have been glimpses of how the new politics Tahrir allowed protesters to imagine have continued to impact daily life. This is apparent in the emergence of grassroots political parties (DW 2021) that have sought to reconceptualise Iraqi politics away from sectarianism and towards unitary Iraqi nationalism (author's interviews with party activists, May 2022). As another example, women's rights activists have repeatedly attributed wider acceptance of gender equality in Iraqi society to the revolution. In these ways, and others that I do not have the space to discuss in this paper, the revolution in Tahrir Square produced 'a new space' in Lefebvre's terms. It not only altered the material space of the square but also continues to have an impact on daily life through the way it changed Iraqis' relationships to each other and to the state.

In this paper, I have argued that the revolution in Tahrir Square was a response to the degradation of space in Baghdad after 2003. I showed that protesters used the square tactically to alter the dynamics of contention in their favour. I also argued that despite the material space of the revolution on Tahrir Square coming to an end, protesters nevertheless saw what unfolded there as revolutionary because it allowed them to imagine politics anew for the first time since 2003. In this way, I have contributed to work on social movements in the Middle East by highlighting the revolutionary potential of the imagination and centring protesters' understanding of it, therefore challenging academic norms about who gets to create theory. This has also allowed me to undertake a nuanced analysis of the events that unfolded in the square, as the focus on the imagination means that I do not need to claim that social relations changed beyond recognition to argue that something of lasting significance took place during Iraq's October Revolution.

The findings of this paper are limited to Tahrir Square, Baghdad. As such, this study invites further investigation into the use of space and the understanding of revolution in other areas of Iraq, including the South and the suburbs of the capital. These spaces were equally important to Iraq's October Revolution. For example, despite facing some of the worst violence, protests in the Southern city of Nasiriyah carried on long after those in Baghdad ended and activists there were crucial to the coordination of countrywide protest strategies (author's interview with protester, May 2022). The Southern cities of Iraq have also given birth to the most significant grassroots political parties to have emerged out of the protest movement. Moreover, the suburb of Zafaraniyah in Southeast Baghdad has received little attention but

was in fact one of the first places where protests broke out in October 2019 (Al-Ain 2019). Documenting the experiences of demonstrators in these areas and others, and their relationship to space, will be crucial to uncovering what is silenced and obscured when we focus on the more easily accessible spaces of the ‘centre’.

Acknowledgements

I thank the protesters who generously gave their time to partake in interviews for this paper. I also thank Toby Dodge for the opportunity and his mentorship, Bassel Salloukh for comments on the initial draft, Benedict Robin-D’Cruz for his help in navigating the literature, Hayder al-Shakeri for support in accessing interviewees and two anonymous reviewers for their comments that were helpful in revising the paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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