

## **Globalization and Islamic Cities of the Middle East**

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### **Abstract**

Throughout the history, cities, from city states of the ancient Greece to the Islamic cities and the cities of the middle ages have been related to each other and have always been the origin of the changes of human societies. The main instances of communications and transformations can be witnessed in Islamic cities, such as Mecca, Baghdad, Basra, Isfahan, Cordova, and Cairo during the eighth to tenth centuries A.D. when they were involved in major, and mostly, global processes. The Middle East, after a long period of decline, is now the arena of globalization, and its cities are entering into the process of globalization and are increasingly connecting to the network of global cities.

The aim of the present study is to explain the range of globalization in the Middle Eastern mega cities, and the position of such cities in the network of global cities. This study was conducted through descriptive-analytical method. The findings indicate that although Islamic cities have been, for a long time, the main actors at global level, they were unable to play a significant role in the process of globalization due to lack of civil institutions, colonization and the rentier nature of most regional governments. However, today, some of these cities, due to their geographical position, and friendly approach to world economy and capital have been able to gain a good position in the network of global cities.

**Keywords:** Islamic city, Globalization, Middle East, Global city.

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### **1. Introduction**

Undoubtedly, during the long period prior to industrial era, vast urban areas such as Babel, Rome, Constantinople, Baghdad, Shi On, Beijing, Hangzhou, and Nankyn emerged. Some of these cities were located at the heart of empires. They were the home for tens and sometimes hundreds of thousand people and economic-cultural relations with each other.

Some of the cities formed at the heart of empires were Islamic cities. The Eastern world, even before accepting Islam, had large cities. The growth of business and development of agricultural methods resulted in the flourishing of the civilization in Islamic cities, great importance of ancient cities like Damascus, Aleppo, and Samarqand, and establishment of new cities like Basra, Fustat, and Baghdad. Baghdad was established in the 8th century, and was so developed at the end of the 9th century that whose population, in an area equal to that of Paris in the 19th century, was over 1 million people. The same movement happened in the western areas of the Islamic world, and the civil life and civilization – after the period of decline caused by the attacks of semi-wild tribes - flourished again leading to the establishment of cities like Qirvan, Fas, Cordova, and Palorm. Between two periods of urbanization city-building, i.e. between the booming period of Greek and Roman civilization and the period commencing from the 12th century A.D. and lasting to the 19th century in the Western countries, the booming of Islamic cities from the 8th to the 10th century A.D. is considered as one of the major events of urbanization history. In this vast area, in the market of these cities, Gold Dinar was used as a global exchange tool. Gold Dinar, as strong and dominant currency, had a status equal to that of Dollar today. Commercial methods and securities like promissory notes and bills were invented in the business societies of Eastern Islam. After a long period, the Europe of the Middle Ages, understood the benefits of business documents and notes through trading with Syria and Lebanon and used them in the markets following the Muslims (Lombard, 1977: 81).

One of the cities playing a major role in the world economic process was Isfahan. Naser Khosro, in his famous itinerary, wrote that there were 200

currency exchanges in Isfahan when, in the 11th century A.D., there was still no trace of Bourgeoisie in Europe. The important point is that, at that time, there was a banking system in Iran and neighboring countries that could transfer money from one city to another, while such a system were not common in Europe for centuries (Katoozian, 2010: 54).

According to professor Sassen, one of the famous theoreticians of global city, today, global city refers to a kind of city witnessed throughout centuries (Brodell, 1984; Hall, 1966; King, 1990), and most probably, was present in Asia earlier than the West (Sassen, 2000:XXI). Nowadays, globalization of capitalism is a tool for connecting Islamic cities and regions to global market. Hence, capitalism has resulted in the emergence of new cities whose function is different from old Islamic cities. Formation of industrial cities, ports, refineries, and railroads played an important part in renovation of civil structure in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and countries of Persian Gulf region (Ghalibaf & Poormoosavi, 2007: 212).

The most comprehensive studies on the Islamic cities of the Middle East are mainly devoted to analysis of their urban context. However, considering what has mentioned earlier, globalization of economies and development of IT has contributed to the importance of cities in economic activities. In this respect, the present study intends to investigate the position of the Islamic cities of the Middle East in the network of global cities based on two rankings proposed by Southborough research group of global cities and globalization and 2010 World report of urban competitiveness.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The present study is an applied research conducted through analytic-descriptive method using library resources. The study aims at finding the following question: “What factors affect the transnational relations of the Islamic cities of the Middle East, today and throughout the history?” The objective of the present study is to explain the scope of the globalization in Middle East megacities and the position of those cities in the network of global cities.

### **3. Theoretical background**

#### **3-1. the concept of globalization**

There is no consensus among scholars regarding a comprehensive definition of globalization. Each group, depending on their conception of this phenomenon and their intellectual and political backgrounds, propose a specific definition of globalization. In some definitions, the economic aspect of globalization is emphasized, while other definitions focus on political, cultural, or communicational aspects of globalization. In other words, those who have addressed the issue from different economic and cultural aspects propose different definitions for it according to their interests. In a broad definition, globalization refers to development of global communications, organization of social life in global dimension, and growth of global awareness, and thus, stability of global society. In this regard, Sir Peter Hall points that “every era relies on concepts that attract public attention, and recently, globalization has emerged as one of such concepts in the contemporary era” (Short Hunkim, 2005: 3). In the following, some definitions of globalization from economic, cultural, and political aspects are presented:

A) Economic globalization; this kind of definition is popular among the proponents of global system theory or global capitalism theory. They tend to define the issue relying upon the globalization of economy. Friedman, one of the outstanding proponents of economic strategy, define it as the integration of markets, national states, and technologies in a novel way that enable individuals, companies, and national states to reach the world more rapidly, deeply, and in a low cost than ever before. Globalization means the expansion of capitalism of free markets to most countries of the world (Friedman, 2000: 7-8).

B) Cultural globalization; Robertson considers globalization as “the compression of the world and increasing the awareness from the world as a whole” (Robertson, 1992: 8). Of course, this definition of globalization which is inspired by the expansion of socioeconomic processes and transformation of industry and technology had been proposed in the past.

For instance, Marx points to a phenomenon as “destruction of place by time” in one his works (Thomlinson, 2002: 15). This attitude toward globalization and its definition tries to indicate how the process of globalization compresses, expands, and deepens time-place for the people throughout the worlds, creating some conditions for a global society (Sklair, 1999: 154).

C) Political globalization: recent changes in world politics have greatly changed our traditional conceptions of previous levels of analysis. James Rona calls the changes made in world politics “turbulence in the world of politics”. He the factors contributing to this turbulence as following:

1. Moving from industrial order to post-industrial order and micro-electronic order;
2. Emergence of new issues like air pollution, terrorism, drug trading, etc. which are neither national nor local; rather transnational;
3. Crisis of decreasing governments’ authority due to new issues which are not totally within the scope of governments’ authority;
4. Increase in the efficiency of micro systems and formation of decentralized inclinations;
5. Increase in the skills and attitudes of humans (Rosena, 2003: 23-24).

Global city has cultural, political, and economic features, does not depend upon physical distances regarding social relations, and place has no effect on it. Indeed, global city is a place which has new combinations of transnational relations in economic, political, and cultural aspects in the space of movements and in a transnational scale.

### **3-2. Globalization and city**

Globalization has a special geography which selects megacities as the center of development, and makes it possible for them to have new functions, particularly for managing production process and offering high quality services to producers (Sarrafı, 2000: 73). In other words, globalization occurs in cities, especially in megacities. Today, the global system of production, market, financial issues, services, communication, culture, and

policy is spatially formed through global network of cities. Global changes in economy, culture, and politics have many effects on the renovation of the structure of cities around the world (Short, 2005: 13). According Sassen, such functions have created an important strategic role for important cities. These cities, regardless of their long history of trade and banking, now work in four ways: first, as very centralized headquarters for organizing world economy; second, as key places for specialized financial and service companies which have substituted industrial production as the main sectors of the economy; third, as the bases of production, such as innovation in these important industries; and fourth, as markets for products and innovations. Such changes in the function of cities have significant impact upon both international economic activities and the form of the city. Cities control large resources, and at the same time, restructure financial industries, specialized services, social and economic urban order. Hence, a new form of cities has been created, i.e. global cities (Sassen, 2001: 85).

In sum, it can be argued that despite multidimensional nature of the impacts of globalization on cities, global economy has had the most effect on cities. Economically, in the process of globalization, cities are faced with the reduction and change of the role of industries in industrial cities of developed countries and increase in their role in developing countries. Michele Pacione considers the emergence of global cities, deindustrialization, and weakening of old industrial cities as the main outcomes of globalization of economy at city level (Pacione, 2001: 285).

### **3-3. the model of global city**

The term “global city” was first used in 1915 by Patrick Gads to refer to a group of growing cities which cover broader groups or larger sets. In 1966, Sir Peter Hall published the book of global cities investigating the rapid expansion of cities like New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, and Moscow, as well as their readiness for becoming global cities. Hall recognized that these cities are large centers of political power, the center of national and international governments, the place of business, centralization of capital,

communications, and the center of talents, research, arts, and culture (KamNg & Hills, 2003: 152). However, the model of global cities was observed in the works of John Friedman (1986) and Saskia Sassen (1991) whose main interests were discovering and theorizing new economic geography of the world in line with globalization. By formation of contemporary globalization and networks created using communication technology, it has become possible for the cities to enter into the space of trends and achieve a position within the network of global economy. This position can determine the weight and importance of cities in world economy. According to Short's definition of cosmopolis, presence of a city in the network can be considered as a basis for its global nature (Short, 2004: 2). In other words, as a megacity enters into the network, it experiences the movements and plays a global role in contemporary globalization. Indeed, global cities must be considered as places through which large areas of the world join the place where global capital has been accumulated. These cities are considered as the main nodes of the network, and the more a node in the structure of network behaves friendly with the capital, the more capital and multinational companies it will attract. In this situation, capital can provide a city of the world with the opportunities of development. Therefore, as soon as a city becomes able to participate in the network, companies can promote its status in the hierarchy of the network and provide its citizens with many opportunities by investing in new factories and facilities and giving loans and subsidies. That is why cosmopolises are now considered as the emerging power centers and are greatly competing with each other as a change in the nodes of the network would lead to change of urban places and decline or promotion of them in the hierarchy of the network. Hence, places, as nodes in the network and in competition with other nodes, might weaken in the movements the outcome of which being its economic, social, and physical decline (Ghourchi, 2009: 11). Taylor believes that in the information age, knowledge is sign of power more than ever before. Concentration of knowledge, especially in advanced production services, such as accounting, advertising, banking and financial

activities, insurance, law, and managerial counseling has strengthened the function of global economy (Taylor, Johnston, 2001, 7). According to Harvey, another feature of global cities is the uncontrollable nature of activity and space, because creation of the space and its final product, i.e. created space is out of individual and collective control, and we hardly know how to deal with created space, whether in reality or in imagination (Harvey, 1997: 288).

#### **4. Research findings**

##### **4-1. Globalization and Islamic cities of the Middle East**

Islamic cities are the cities established or grown in countries with culture and values originated from Islam. Urbanization and Islamic cities cover a certain period (since 14 centuries ago) and surprisingly, is expanded in a vast area in three important and ancient areas. These areas are from Atlantic Ocean to China Sea, from Guinea Gulf to Central Asia, from Balkan to Indonesia, and from the Horn of Africa to Bengal Gulf (Koneo, 1384: 14-15). However, in this study the cities located in the Middle East geographic area are discussed. According to archeologists, the first cities of the history were established in this area which is called the origin of human civilization. The Middle East is limited to Iran and Turkey from north, to Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine from south; its southern border is limited to Saudi Arabia, and small countries of the coast of Persian Gulf, Oman, Yemen, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain; and Libya and Egypt from southwest. Other than political borders, this area does not have any specific borders. Existence of some common characteristics in the Middle East has led to unity among its people. Culturally, Islam has united the residents of the Middle East. In fact, it can be argued that the region has an Islamic culture (Biomonte, 1990: 5), and the cities developed in this region can be called Islamic cities.

The importance of Islamic cities was shown by the fact that when Prophet Mohammad invited people to Islam, people were divided into three groups: first, Bedouins who were cameleers and caravan guards; second,



residents of the south coast of Oman Sea and people of Yemen who were sailors, and long before Prophet's mission were sailing in Indian Ocean; and third, businessmen, exchangers, usurers, and rich people who lived in cities and benefited from trading between Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. The work and life of Bedouins and sailors of the southern regions of Arabia were in the hands of the third group. In early years, Islam was strengthened by businessmen, caravan owners, and sailors and penetrated from deserts to regions of the coast of Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Red Sea and Northern Africa through passing trading roads between Arabia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt (Lombard, 1977: 85).

Regarding urban life in Islamic period, Weber states that the main factor of the power of city noblemen was their wealth which was acquired through tolls they got from caravans. They invested on slavery, and the agents of central government had to reach a compromise with powerful urban noblemen. However, according to Weber, the authority of city noblemen did not guide the city toward an independent and self-governed society. For example, he discusses about the foundations of urban life in Mecca in detail and concludes that in Islamic period only tribal and guild associations were the major authority for collective and organized life of the citizens. However, these collective efforts are not considered as the collective and organized operations of citizens. Guilds, businessmen, tradespeople, and artisans in Islamic cities defend from the interests of their members. Also, there were religious organizations of scholars, sophists, and dervishes, but no sign of self-governed association of citizens can be observed (Ashraf, 1981: 102). In other words, one reason for stopping global dynamicity in Islamic cities is lack of self-governed (local) associations, or lack of necessary conditions for the establishment of civil institutions for governing the cities which prevented those cities from entering into transnational arenas.

However, after some centuries and despite continuous political, military, and religious tensions, wars, and other barriers targeting the stability of the region, which certainly have negative impacts upon local independence and decentralization, some great and valuable achievements have been achieved,

such as the first local election in Saudi Arabia, democratic local election in Palestine, revival of the election of municipality through public voting in Jordan, and reforms of the constitution of Bahrain in 2002. The Islamic republic of Iran and Kuwait have had significant changes, too. Turkey, as a country that had modern municipality system since 1930 and whose citizens support decentralization as one of the criteria of membership in UN is distinguished from other countries of the region. In 2004 and 2005, three new laws in line with decentralization were approved in this country. During the past 10 years, all countries of the region have moved toward administrative decentralization through reforms in their constitutions and laws. Despite the general similarity of the countries in this regard, the aim of the governments are totally different (UCLG, 2008: 189).

As mentioned earlier, nowadays, Middle East cities, due to decentralization followed as a plan by some governments, have gained some authority. They have acquired local independence to play a part in transnational activities. One example of this is Istanbul (Constantinople), the largest city of Turkey and its cultural and economic center. Other cities of the region (Table 1) such as Dubai and Doha have been able to gain a proper position relative to other cities. The authors believe that these cities have succeeded due to their geographical position. Also, they are not competed by other major cities of the region, like Tehran. However, the policies of their governments in providing capital security and attracting regional investments should not be overlooked. In fact, the governments of the region with their friendly approach toward capital have won the competition with other cities of the region. In other words, it can be said that the major factor of their success was accompaniment with capital system; rather than decentralization of power and establishment of local management institutions. This can be observed in Piran's analysis of Middle East cities from the perspective of Weber; "Weber considers a development independent from the existing and central government as the historical responsibility of the city. According to Weber, cities are responsible for revitalizing a class that confronts the government and creates a new system

through the unity of independent cities. In the Eastern countries, domination-government prevents wealth from changing into social and political power; it prevents the emergence of a new class in the urban society. Hence, in such societies, individual identity gains meaning through dependence upon a family and is defined based on family relation, not because of belonging to “city” and occupation” (Piran, 1991: 104). In fact, the cities of this region, due to lack of civil institutions, are connected to global economy in a very specific way (providing energy and consumer market, like Dubai). That is to say, although these countries are the essential part of global economy, their political, social and cultural dependence on the world is not organic. It can be argued that they have chosen neo-liberalism as their local development model. David Harvey, in his seminal work, “The brief history of neo-liberalism” depicts the real nature of neo-liberalism. He not only uncovers the wretched condition of unemployment, the increase in the gap between classes, and slave-like situation of working in neo-liberalist governments (especially in the third world, or developing countries), but also reveals the match between neo-liberalism and totalistic governments.

#### **4-2. the position of Islamic cities in the network of global cities**

The global cities are often classified according to their economic-political power as well as their share in the formation of global networks. According to the findings of the studies conducted by Friedmann and Sassen who were of major theoreticians of global cities, the most comprehensive classification has been proposed by research group of global cities and globalization in Loughborough University. This classification divides the cities of the world into three groups of alpha, beta, and gamma, and ranks them according to cosmopolitan values from 1 to 12.

Another classification has been conducted in the research group of urban competition by Pangfi Ni, professor of economy in social science academy of China and Carl Crest, professor of economy in Bucknell University of America and their team in social science academy of China. They have collected comparable data for 500 cities and investigated the competition for

globalization of the cities according to different indices such as GDP, prices, development, patents, and employment. They could rank the competition of 500 cities for globalization. In the following, each of the classifications is discussed in detail.

In the classification done by the research group of global cities and globalization in Loughborough University, the Islamic cities of the Middle East, such as Istanbul, are positioned in the Gamma group beside global developed cities like Atlanta, Barcelona, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Budapest, Copenhagen, and Hamburg. Other cities in this group are Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Dubai, Riyadh, and Tehran as Islamic cities that could reach globalization stage with relative evidence (Scott, 2005: 79- 80).

Another classification done by the global research group of urban competition has been able to collect comparable data for 500 cities and investigate the competition of the cities for globalization according to different indices. This classification provides a general ranking of the competition of 500 cities for globalization. Here, the ranking of the Islamic cities of the Middle East among 500 cities are presented. As it is presented in Table 2 and Map 1, Islamic cities of the region, such as Dubai, Doha, and Kuwait have good ranks in the global ranking. Considering the present situation of Islamic cities and countries which have high ranks in the process of globalization, it can be understood that there is a direct relationship between globalization and transnational development policies the Middle East countries. A city enters into the global arenas and competes with other cities to the degree that its country plays a role in international economy, policy, security, and culture.

**Table 1. Ranking of the Middle East cities in globalization and their scores among 400 cities of the world**

	Country	City	Score	Ranking among 500 cities
1	UAE	Dubai	0.493	39
2	Qatar	Doha	0.472	55
3	Kuwait	Kuwait	0.395	107
4	Saudi Arabia	Riyadh	0.376	117
5	Turkey	Istanbul	0.355	136
6	Bahrain	Manama	0.352	139
7	Turkey	Ankara	0.261	229
8	Lebanon	Beirut	0.255	235
9	Egypt	Cairo	0.213	286
10	Oman	Masqat	0.193	316
11	Egypt	Alexandria	0.192	319
12	Pakistan	Karachi	0.188	331
13	Iran	Tehran	0.187	332
14	Algeria	Algeria	0.172	352
15	Jordan	Amman	0.17	357
16	Libya	Tripoli	0.169	358
17	Pakistan	Lahore	0.168	361
18	Pakistan	Islam Abad	0.15	375
19	Iraq	Baghdad	0.14	387
20	Morocco	Casablanca	0.133	399
21	Syria	Damascus	0.132	400
22	Yemen	Sana	0.124	408
23	Afghanistan	Kabul	0.097	464
24	Morocco	Rabat	0.092	471

Designed by the authors, according to the world report of urban competition, 2010

However, considering the trend of the establishment of government structures and civil institution, as well as their role in globalization of the cities of the region, one problem of the formation of civil institutions in Islamic cities according to Weber would be the background for local democracy which has an important role in the formation of local state and the move toward globalization of cities. This process is rather slow in some countries, specially, cities of UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, etc. Thus, other factors

must be considered for investigating the relation of the cities mentioned in the above table with global cities. This is presented in Table 2. As it can be observed in the table, in most of these countries there is no election held for selecting for local managers, like city council, and they lack political parties.

**Table 2. Public participation in local management in Middle East countries**

Country	Date of the last local councils election	Date of the first city council election	Existence of political parties
Saudi Arabia	2005	1963 in Riyadh-but there were no elections during 1963-2005 (the first election in national scale)	No
UAE	No elections	No elections	No
Iraq	2004 in Dhi Qar province, 2000 and 2001 in Kurdistan*, 1999 in other parts*	1869 – no elections in 1957 to 1999	Yes
Iran	2006	1999	Yes
Jordan	2003	18781 - no elections in 1957 - 1989	Yes (since 1992)
Kuwait	2006 (in some parts of the country)	1932	No
Lebanon	2004	1878 – no elections in 1963**-1998 (2001 for villages of the south)	Yes
Oman	No elections	No municipality	No
Palestine	2005	1927 – no election in 1934 (Gaza Strip) or 1976 (West Bank) to 2005	Yes
Qatar	2003	1999	Yes
Syria	2003***	1878 – no elections in 1972 – 2007***	Yes
Turkey	2004	1856 (Istanbul) 1878 (Ottoman Empire), 1930 (Turkey Republic)	Yes
Yemen	2006	2001	Yes

Notes: \* February 2000, for regions under domination of Kurd patriots and May 2001 for regions under control of Kurd Democrat party.  
 \*\*The first urban election in national scale  
 \*\*\* without a close list

(UCLG, 2008: 306)

According to the above table, the Middle East countries mentioned, as followers of neoliberalist system, only modeled this part of local development, while advanced countries of the world act according to Social-democrat model aware of the role of people. In the above table, it has been

1- This refers to urban election in some municipalities at the time of Ottoman Empire in 1878 according to the laws of municipalities and provinces.

shown that the people of most Middle East countries play no role in the control for their local issues. As it was mentioned earlier, what cannot be ignored and must be considered as the main link of the cities of this region with the network of global cities is their geographical context, i.e. the direct role of geography in economic, cultural, and political development of the countries of this region, and its effect on the position of the Islamic cities of the region in globalization. Regarding the relationship between geographical context and areas formed in different geographical structures, Cohen, the contemporary geographer, refers to two main factors: “sea” backgrounds and “continental” backgrounds. The areas formed in these two structures differ from each other. In fact, in sea backgrounds, due to the existence of coasts or rivers connected to free seas, communication with other parts of the world is facilitated, commerce and migration are developed, and specialized economic processes are accelerated. These areas are indeed the origins of human civilization where urbanization has commenced. However, continental contexts, due to geographical location far from free seas and existence of physical barriers such as mountains, deserts, high plateaus, are not able to interact much with other parts of the world. These areas have old industrial bases which push back their urban economy (Cohen, 2008: 78-79). Hence, Cohen’s model is in line with the model proposed in this paper. In fact, the significant effect of the features of sea contexts on the position of the Middle East cities in the ranking of the network of global cities can be clearly seen.

### **5. Conclusion**

Considering what has been mentioned earlier, in the past, the Islamic world, through its position gained in world economy with the help of cities like Isfahan, Baghdad, Cairo, Cordova, Basra, and Fustat, and through its progress in social thinking and by its intellectual development, played a significant role in the fate the world between the 8th and 11th centuries A.D. However, during long years since the large cities of Islam had lost their role as the economic centers of the world, Muslims’ economic, cultural, and

even political decline started together with the ever-increasing growth and development of the West.

Authors believe that although some cities of the Middle East have now gained some authority and have become able to acquire local independence to play their parts in transnational arenas, as a result of some governmental plans, one main reason of the development of some cities like Istanbul, Dubai, and Doha at global level was their easy communication with other parts of the world. Regardless of the role of natural resources like oil, geographical background of these cities has contributed to their success. They, through access to free seas and rivers, have been able to accelerate economic processes by development of commerce and migration.

In other words, the main factor of the relation of these cities with global network is not formation of civil institutions and an efficient local government; rather the reason is the position of such cities which is gained through geographical backgrounds. The important role of geographical position throughout the history indicates that whenever Muslim countries dominated the world markets through their roads, their economy grew, and their wealth increased. Nevertheless, overlooking these issues had resulted in the decline of the cities of the region. Nowadays, Islamic cities of the Middle East, depending on their geographical location, have become regional and global actors and have been able to gain a special place at transnational level.

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