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Were post-colonial cities US imperial cities?

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Abstract

This exploratory text proposes a US imperial ‘research perspective’ on post-war post-colonial cities – cities that the United States did not colonially occupy, i.e. not cities like Manila, 1898–1946. US imperial actors and interests helped shape such cities, and in turn were shaped by their people and structures. Importantly, the US case seems to strengthen the general recent view, also regarding formal empires, that it makes little sense to posit the existence of an imperial city type, and more sense to use ‘the imperial urban’ as a research perspective.

This text is an exploratory think piece.¹ It proposes a US imperial research perspective on post-war post-colonial cities – cities that the United States did *not* colonially occupy, i.e. *not* cities such as the Philippine capital of Manila from 1898 to 1946. It is not that post-war post-colonial cities *were* simply and exclusively US-imperial in nature. I am not positing a new city type. Rather, US imperial actors and interests helped shape these cities, and in turn were shaped by the people and structures in these localities. Importantly and more broadly, the US case seems to strengthen the emerging view, by historians such as Ulrich Hofmeister, regarding formal empires as well, that it makes little sense to posit the existence of an imperial city *type*, and more sense to use ‘the imperial urban’ as a research perspective.²

Certainly, the US imperial factor was not equally important everywhere. While one can use a US imperial research perspective on many cities, the American factor was strongly at play in only a few cities: a hyper-concentration that helped shape how the US empire worked and was made visible. What is more, the imperial factor was

¹This is one of four texts by the author that involve early post-colonial Beirut. The other three are squarely on Beirut, and look at cultural, political-commercial and urban aspects of the advent of international aviation. Two are under review; one is www.sagw.ch/sgmoik/archiv/blog/details/news/aerocity-beirut-how-an-air-port-shaped-a-citys-culture.

²U. Hofmeister, ‘Cities, empires, and Eastern Europe’, in *idem* and F. Riedler (eds.), *Imperial Cities in the Tsarist, the Habsburg, and the Ottoman Empires* (London, 2023), 12.

not homogeneous; the interests of US actors were not uniform. Neither was the imperial factor dominant. Other European-imperial, local urban, nation-state and regional actors and interests weighed heavily, and interacted with Americans in a variety of ways. All this being said, the imperial factor mattered – for post-war America was as mighty a state as any in history. By 1945, it alone possessed atomic weapons and produced 50 per cent of the world's goods and services.

My proposition builds on the literature on imperial cities.³ This term caught on following the publication of two landmark books published in 1999: Jonathan Schneer's *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis*, and Felix Driver and David Gilbert's volume *Imperial Cities*.⁴ Related studies multiplied.⁵ Historians examined both European capitals and non-capitals, and not only explored culture – which was Driver and Gilbert's focus⁶ – but also recognized – as did Driver and Gilbert⁷ – that 'cities contributed to empires in many ways', as D. Keene put it.⁸ In G. Ginn and P. Spearritt's words, 'a city is an imperial city when its urban forms – its physical reality – and functions exist to establish, perpetuate, and assert the power relationships of empire'.⁹ Meanwhile, reflecting on the various critiques of 'the colonial city'¹⁰ and 'the imperial city', Ulrich Hofmeister has recently proposed to see the latter not as a type, but as a 'research perspective'.¹¹ It is not that some cities are imperial, while others are not, he has argued. Rather, cities can be imperial in different degrees and in different ways. Put differently, having an imperial dimension is not exceptional but normal for many urban places.

Hofmeister's approach is useful for our case-study. The post-war US empire, while *not* non-territorial, and while sometimes using post-European imperial territories,

³Relatedly, it should be noted that the term colonial city became common in the 1950s (R. Redfield and M. Singer, 'The cultural role of cities', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 3 (1954), 537–3). Scholars framed it as a city type; and they located it in colonies only. Both points were eventually challenged. Presaging Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler's call to study metropole and colony in one analytical frame, Anthony King in 1990 posited that urban developments in Europe and (ex)-colonies were intertwined. F. Cooper and A. Stoler, 'Introduction', in *idem* (eds.), *Tensions of Empire* (Berkeley, 1997), 1–51; A. King, *Urbanism, Colonialism and the World Economy* (London, 1990), 78. Also: A. King, *Colonial Urban Development* (London, 1976). Moreover, many scholars saw racial segregation as a key feature of colonial cities; for a chronologically long view, which, however, still peaks in modern European colonies, see T. Metcalf, 'Colonial cities', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford, 2013), 735–69.

⁴J. Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven, 1999); F. Driver and D. Gilbert, (eds.), *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display, and Identity* (Manchester, 1999). Their thematic focus on culture reflected British-centric New Imperial History.

⁵Hofmeister, 'Cities', 15.

⁶Also: D. Keene, 'Cities and empires', *Journal of Urban History*, 32 (2005), 8–21, focusing on how imperial cities 'expressed and transmitted imperial ideas': *ibid.*, 8.

⁷Driver and Gilbert, 'Introduction', 3, invoke 'form, use and representation of modern European cities'.

⁸Keene, 'Cities', 9.

⁹G. Ginn and P. Spearritt, 'Cities, imperial', in J. MacKenzie (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Empire* (London, 2016), 1. Also: Keene, 'Cities', 8; Hofmeister, 'Cities', 12; J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World* (Princeton, 2009), 295–6.

¹⁰Some scholars began arguing that cities called 'colonial' were much too diverse to constitute a distinct city type; thus, F. Post, 'Europäische Kolonialstädte in vergleichender Perspektive', in H. Gründer and P. Johanek (eds.), *Kolonialstädte* (Münster, 2001), 1–26, points out that also segregation was not present everywhere, and looked very differently from case to case. Other scholars 'provincialize' the term, calling for more attention to non-Western actors and factors: M. Volait, 'Provincializing colonial architecture', *ABE Journal* (online), 11 (2017), DOI:<https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.3508>. And yet, other scholars 'suggest such alternative designations as "colonized metropolis" or "frontier city"': Hofmeister, 'Cities', 14.

¹¹Hofmeister, 'Cities', 12.

worked spatially in different ways from European empires. It rarely straight out occupied a country and its cities. (The exceptions mattered, though: the German and Japanese (ex)-empires being the most obvious cases.) Rather, besides working through international organizations, which it helped create but did not entirely control,¹² the post-war US was an ‘international...imperial project in which order was produced through the coordination of multiple, “legitimate” nation-states’, to quote historian Paul Kramer.¹³ This included various complex practices. One was building hundreds of often quite isolated military bases on foreign soil.¹⁴

Another practice was to invest considerable means and measures at select sites within a small number of key cities. If my study of Beirut analysed below is any indication, these cities were central not only to their own nation-state but also to the multi-country region around them. We can say that the post-war US international empire practised a *twofold* hyper-concentration regarding cities. While it was visible in many villages, towns and cities (and especially in terms of extraction in many rural areas),¹⁵ it (1) invested disproportionately greater means and measures in a few cities only – and (2) within each city at only very select sites. This approach was in degree, rather than in kind, different from European overseas territorial empires, which were often ‘arterial[ly]’¹⁶ concentrated and displayed in vital places. The extent and nature of this *twofold hyper-concentration* may be the most fundamental difference (in degree) between the European imperial dimension in colonial cities and the US imperial dimension in post-colonial cities. Moreover, if it is true that the Cold War Soviet Union functioned as an international empire as well – though one much less influential than America – then a Soviet-imperial dimension would likely evince some similarities with the US-imperial dimension. (A key difference would be the absence of corporate actors.)

A US imperial research perspective on post-colonial cities mirrors recent trends in US historiography. A fair number of transnational urban historians, although rarely invoking empire, work on cases involving US actors.¹⁷ Moreover, some US urban historians are working empire into their field of study as well. Their approach sits well with our ‘research perspective’ method: these scholars do not consider imperial (and related settler-colonial) factors in isolation from local, regional and nation-state factors in American cities.¹⁸ Further, assorted studies on post-war Americans and

¹²C. Thornton, *Revolution in Development: Mexico and the Governance of the Global Economy* (Berkeley, 2021).

¹³P. Kramer, ‘Power and connection: imperial histories of the United States in the world’, *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), 1348–91, at 1366.

¹⁴M. Gillem, *America Town* (Minneapolis, 2004); C. Sandars, *America’s Overseas Garrisons: The Leasehold Empire* (Oxford, 2000). Wartime Latin American beginnings: R. Herman, *Cooperating with the Colossus* (New York, 2022). Related: R. Oldenziel, ‘Islands: the United States as a networked empire’, in G. Hecht (ed.), *Entangled Geographies* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 13–41.

¹⁵M. Black, *The Global Interior* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

¹⁶F. Cooper, ‘Conflict and connection: rethinking African colonial history’, *American Historical Review*, 99 (1994), 1516–45, at 1533.

¹⁷A. Sandoval-Strausz and N. Kwak (eds.), *Making Cities Global: The Transnational Turn in Urban History* (Philadelphia, 2018); N. Kwak, *A World of Homeowners: American Power and the Politics of Housing Aid* (Chicago, 2015).

¹⁸M. Mahoney and B. Foster, ‘Building empire? The nation-state, empire, and transnationalism in US urban historiography’, *Neoamericanist*, 5 (2010), 1–5; A. Heath, ‘Hidden metaphors of empire’, *ibid.*, 81–2; S. Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis* (Cambridge, 2001).

the US government abroad, from tourism via political architecture to civil aviation,¹⁹ centre on cities empirically, though rarely analytically. Last, cities may be a good case-study for the recent call to ‘analyze the US empire and post-colonial countries as a joint field’.²⁰

There are a good number of post-colonial cities for which a US imperial research perspective may make sense. After all, US actors not only maintained but also expanded their presence in regions where they had substantial presence before World War II, most importantly in Latin America. They also increased their presence and influence in other regions including Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and the Middle East, as well as in Africa, and in places that were under European colonial control until the late 1950s or early 1960s.

The case of Beirut

To convey a preliminary empirical sense of what the US imperial presence looked like in a city, let me use the case of Beirut.²¹ As this text is an exploratory think piece, I will outline venues of research and raise questions rather than provide definite answers.

Our timeframe covers the 1940s–1960s. During that time, Beirut was a regional hub that connected late colonial and early post-colonial countries in the Arab East and oil-rich Arabia and the Gulf with global trade, banking, communications, transport and knowledge/education circuits.²² These capacities were mutually reinforcing. Thus, Port Beirut was dominant because Beirut boasted ‘33 banks’, ‘maritime agents...knowing their business to perfection’, ‘an excellent world-spanning telephone and telex network’ and ‘the region’s premier airport’.²³ No wonder that ‘European and American companies...opened *regional* marketing or servicing offices’ in Beirut and that many ‘international agencies [and] diplomatic missions’ chose that city, as well.²⁴

Beirut’s regional-global role had sturdy roots in the late Ottoman period and during French rule (1918–46)²⁵ – strong enough to suggest a path dependency. But the city’s continuing dominance after 1945 was not automatic. It was driven by, and best served by, Beirut-centric commercial/financial and political elite families

¹⁹C. Endy, *Cold War Holidays* (Chapel Hill, 2004); R. Robin, *Enclaves of America: The Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad, 1900–1965* (Princeton, 1992); J. Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America’s Embassies* (New York, 2011); J. Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

²⁰C. Schayegh, ‘Introduction and a note on U.S. imperial–postcolonial relations’, in *idem* (ed.), *Globalizing the U.S. Presidency* (London, 2020), 1–16, at 8.

²¹S. Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley, 2010). Contemporary studies: C. Churchill, *The City of Beirut* (Beirut, 1954); S. Khalaf and P. Kongstad, *Hamra of Beirut* (Leiden, 1973). Cultural analyses overlapping with the city: Z. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut’s Global Sixties* (Cambridge, 2020); R. Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton, 2019).

²²C. Schayegh, <https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/switch-cities-decolonization-and-globalization-singapore-beirut-dakar-f913b2101599>.

²³‘L’avenir du port’ (1959), LA636/Levant, Direction Afrique-Levan, Archive du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

²⁴W. Persen, ‘Lebanese economic development’, *Middle East Journal*, 12 (1958), 277–94, at 288 (my italics).

²⁵C. Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA, 2017).

dominating Lebanon's 'Merchant Republic'.²⁶ Moreover, the city needed continued socio-political and financial-economic investment by its former colonial overseers. One was France, which stayed involved after Lebanon gained full independence in 1946. Another was Britain, which had once ruled Lebanon and deepened its roots there in 1941–45. Most critical however, was the appearance of the United States. While accepting Britain's 'paramount power' in the early post-war Middle East, Washington 'applied...Open Door in trade, exports, monetary policy, and...US oil and aviation'²⁷ – and Lebanon was a focal point. This approach built on the Beirut elite's 'sympath[y] to closer connections to US interests' and on a well-established US cultural-educational and commercial presence, manifest in the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Ford Company.²⁸ It was also unmistakable in Washington's support of the US oil Tapline from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon, opened in 1950, and in US troops landing in Beirut in 1958 to back Lebanon's pro-Western government.²⁹

America's imperial presence in post-colonial Beirut was apparent in various interlocking ways. Let me highlight five. First, infrastructurally, the US government and several US companies including Pan American Airways were centrally involved in planning, financing, building and then serving a massive new international airport (BEY), the region's largest. Opened in 1950, BEY considerably influenced Beirut's society, culture and cityscape, and underpinned the city's redoubled role as a regional-global hub. (Beirut's massive port continued mattering, too.)³⁰

Second, from a socio-cultural point of view, US tourists visited Beirut in ever-growing numbers from the 1950s, by ship and increasingly by airplane, supplemented by thousands of US Sixth Fleet sailors and marines periodically on leave. As a matter of fact, in 1964 for instance, Americans formed the single largest national contingent of arrivals at Beirut International Airport, accounting for 22 per cent.³¹

Third, representationally, the US government and companies built or renovated truly imposing buildings at strategic sites in the city. Washington used a three-wing, nine-storey-high building to house its embassy, which was Beirut's largest, off Beirut's waterfront. In 1955, Pan American Airways moved into a new emblematic building, its region-wide headquarters, on central Riad al-Sulh Square. And again at the Corniche, Pan American's subsidiary InterContinental Hotels Corporation opened the Phoenicia-Intercontinental Hotel in 1961, whose novel design – including a subterranean bar with a glass wall looking out on the swimming pool – made it a new urban landmark and *the* spot to see and be seen.

Fourth, in terms of organization, the US embassy and the large support staffs working in the Beirut offices of US companies including Pan American and the oil giant Aramco and its subsidiary Tapline, managed untold mundane administrative

²⁶C. Gates, *The Merchant Republic of Lebanon* (London, 1998); M. Johnson, *Class and Client in Beirut* (London, 1986); H. Safieddine, *Banking on the State* (Stanford, 2019).

²⁷Irene Gendzier, *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon, 1945–1958* (New York, 1997), 25.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 55 (quote), 8, 88.

²⁹Shipping via the Suez Canal continued, but cost more.

³⁰Relatedly, Pan Am in 1949–55 was financially administratively operationally allied with Middle East Airlines, the region's largest.

³¹National Tourism Council, 'Enquête touristique menée par le Conseil National du Tourisme à l'Aéroport de Beyrouth en 1964', p. 3, 19920554/136, Fonds Delprat (87 AS), Archives nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France. I thank Zeead Yaghi for this document.

matters for thousands of US citizens, employees, officials and military personnel in Lebanon and beyond in the region.

Fifth and last, historically, the US imperial presence could draw on (but also sometimes clashed with) the more than hundred-year-old presence of Americans in Beirut: first as missionaries, and from 1866, crucially, in the form of the aforementioned AUB,³² the region's premier university. In the 1940s–1950s, Washington, the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, and US oil companies financed new area-studies, petroleum, economic and engineering programmes at AUB. Most US structures in Beirut were close to AUB's campus, by far the city's largest.

Conclusion

Extrapolating from the above case, by way of conclusion, here are six conceptual questions that may inform a research agenda. One question concerns the diversity of US actors and the related fact that non-governmental actors had prominent interests, mutual co-ordination notwithstanding. Perhaps self-evidently, the foremost non-governmental actors were US capitalist corporations. In Beirut, these included, besides the aforementioned Pan American Airways and oil giant Aramco, leading banks such as Chase Manhattan and communication businesses such as AT&T. Since the 1980s, historians have sought to conceptualize the interplay between the Cold War US government and such large corporations.³³ But how did this often complex reality impact the urban structures of post-colonial cities, and what does it tell us about how the US imperial factor worked, evolved and was perceived?

Second, how far did the difference between European imperial dimensions in cities in colonies and the US imperial dimension in post-colonial cities – a difference that, as I noted above, concerns the latter's twofold hyper-concentration – go in specific cases? Relatedly, how did those European dimensions (and their interaction with local factors) shape the *later* US imperial regime? Might it be that towards the end of European colonial control, European colonies already evinced some twofold hyper-concentration? That is, might we see twofold hyper-concentration of the US imperial kind in a few post-colonial cities not so much as a distinct US trait, but as an accentuation of a pattern already visible in late European-controlled colonial cities?

Third, can the US imperial factor *in* post-colonial cities, on which I have focused, be fully understood in isolation from varied links between those cities – their people and institutions, etc. – and America 'proper'? Put differently, how could scholars use cities to analyse post-colonial countries and the US empire, including America itself, as one single analytical field?³⁴

Fourth, how did historical experiences in settler-colonial US cities help shape how American imperial actors worked out their interests in post-colonial cities?

³²Until 1920, AUB was called Syrian Protestant College.

³³David Painter famously argued that Washington actively promoted US corporations' interests and asked them to help 'implement U.S. foreign oil policy', but for Cold War-related geostrategic and geoeconomic reasons also intervened in corporate decisions and was involved in creating and maintaining the conditions, abroad, for business success. In and because of the early Cold War, there was a 'larger role for government' in US business: D. Painter, *Private Power and Public Policy: Multinational Oil Companies and US Foreign Policy, 1941–1954* (London, 1984), 1, 3. Also: M. Black, *The Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

³⁴See Schayegh, 'Introduction and a note on U.S. imperial-postcolonial relations'.

Fifth, how did the sovereignty of a post-colonial city's state, although sometimes nominal, help shape US imperial interaction? That is, how were these imperial participants interacting with – relying on, exploiting, being used or resisted by, etc. – urban and/or nation-state actors?

And last, how did trans-imperial dimensions influence the US imperial presence? How crucial were open or hidden competitions with, and/or a (however partial) path dependency on, other empires that had a say in a post-colonial city? Synchronically, the internationally operating Soviet empire would be key here; and diachronically, European overseas empires, the Japanese empire and non-European land empires such as the Ottoman, to think of the Beirut case.

Make no mistake, our research perspective has pitfalls. Thus, the abundance of US sources may entice scholars to overestimate the American weight, while underestimating tensions between US actors may create too homogeneous a picture. Moreover, there are valid critiques of this research approach. For instance, cases in which US actors held substantively divergent roles and interests might indicate that at least sometimes a *somewhat* homogenizing 'imperial' perspective is misleading. Further, a key question is how scholars can, and whether they should, distinguish between a US imperial presence in post-colonial cities and the wider bundle of processes called Americanization, which are inherently multilateral, in which adaptive recipients are at least as central as US participants, and which often functioned on the ground without the direct presence of US interlocutors.³⁵

This being said, our research perspective has serious advantages. It is a concrete pathway to opening up US history and bringing it into conversation with post-colonial histories. It also helps study concretely how the US empire worked, including the tricky issues of territoriality and interactions with other imperial and post-colonial actors. And it may help us think afresh about who counts as an imperial interlocutor and what an imperial city is.

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³⁵L. Tournès, *Américanisation: une histoire mondiale (XVIIIe–XXIe siècle)* (Paris, 2020).