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BUREAUCRAFT: Statemakers in Amman and Baghdad

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BAKERS AND SOLDIERS

Bakery Hamoudeh, Al-Jubeiha District, Amman, November 2015

"Is the dough speaking [*al-'ajeen byehki*]? Is it ready [*jahizu*]?"[1] Najib enjoyed tormenting me with these questions. After a month working alongside him, he could have anticipated my habitually equivocal answer—"I don't know, come take a look." But Najib delighted in my frustration. "How will they give you a doctorate if you can't even make a decent batch of dough?" he would holler, just loud enough for our work companions to hear, and chuckle. I had arrived at Hamoudeh's with a year's worth of experience in Jordan's bakeries. And yet still, dough bedeviled me. None of the bakers I apprenticed with ever used a recipe. Hardly any of them could fully articulate what exactly made dough come alive. I had botched crucial parts of the bread-making process enough times that I was replaced at the head of the mechanized mixers I tried to vanquish. Defeated, I was told to man the oven, or more depressingly, to pack loaves for sale or helm the cash register.

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Dough that kneads well is the building block of *khubz 'arabi*, the slightly leavened flatbread also known as Arabic or pita bread, which the Jordanian government heavily subsidizes. This dough requires flour, water, sugar, yeast, and a few generous pinches of salt. Five ingredients, but an inordinate number of possible permutations—and stalemates. An excess of water leads to a greasy sheen that makes dough unworkable. A dearth of it and dough desiccates, shrivels on kneading. Weather also matters. It takes longer for dough to rise in colder temperatures, so a bit more yeast is added in winter. Hot or cold water is also on hand for when temperatures change, in case the yeast requires assistance. Recipes offer some succor, but they ultimately provide only the vaguest of roadmaps. *Khubz 'arabi* resists easy standardization; homogeny is a chimera. To make stellar dough requires care, dexterity, and resourcefulness. It demands attention not just to ingredients and machinery but also to the many ways these can combine, associate, and amass.

Such attentions matter because subsidized bread lies at the heart of one of the most sustaining, protracted encounters Jordanians maintain with a state apparatus often critiqued for doing very little. Bakers are the crucial liaisons in this recurring rendezvous, the irreplaceable implementers of a policy designed at desks but formed and finished at a street level that citizens observe, scrutinize, and encounter at all hours of the day. These bakers know well that decently prepared dough results in not the greatest bread. Bad dough usually means no bread altogether. Profit margins on *khubz 'arabi* are thin, patience among hungry customers even thinner, hence my frequent relegation to other tasks. Working with Najib offered consolation, maybe even vindication. He did not promise anything directly, of course. Assurances arrived via his boss, Hosni, for whom he had worked across nearly three decades. "He's a master baker [*Mu'allam khubz huwe*]," the bakery owner surmised. "If he can't teach you, no one can."

Military Checkpoint, Mansour District, Baghdad, May 2018

"Mazen? He's *full option*, man." Normally used to describe a vehicle's complete selection of features, this is the first time I hear the English "full options" converted into the singular and used to characterize a person's work abilities. Nibras utters the phrase in admiration of his colleague; they have both spent years as Iraqi soldiers manning checkpoints in Baghdad. Mazen has built a venerable reputation. He is astute, switched on, knowing what to be alert to as vehicles move slowly through his checkpoint. His greatest talent? Pinpointing vehicle occupants who might be carrying weapons, often handguns. The knack seems almost magical, like the best kind of card trick. But many of Mazen's colleagues are less in awe

and more just jealous. For if a soldier successfully stops or prevents illegal activity, he is rewarded with additional time off from his rotation. Among soldiers tired of populating these urban security installations, extra reprieve is always welcome.

I have been at this checkpoint barely a few days when I get to see Mazen's acumen firsthand and up close. It is early evening, not long after dusk, still a couple of hours from the Friday night traffic that will jam this thoroughfare and pack its high-end restaurants. I glance across the relatively empty lanes and see Mazen flag down a sedan. It sits idle for a minute as Mazen speaks with its driver, an uncommon stop as most vehicles are passing through unencumbered; a queue of cars has already formed behind. He eventually releases the sedan, and the flow resumes. I walk over to Mazen to inquire: What was that, why did you hold that guy up, what were you talking about? "He had a weapon, a gun," Mazen casually replies. But how did you know? "It was obvious," he quips. "His face. Under the sun, I could just tell. . . . His beard, he was not clean shaven." I hold his attention for a moment longer, for another word. "I have experience," Mazen adds almost whimsically. "I have experience [*'andi khibra . . . 'andi khibra*]." And the driver, how come you let him pass? "He showed me his identification. He's in the security forces [*muntasib*], so he's permitted to carry a weapon."

Tasked with scrutinizing the private interstices of vehicular spaces, looking for signs of suspicion, the work that Mazen and his colleagues do at these sites of control [*saitarat*] has long been lamented as futile by Baghdad's residents. Checkpoints do not *do* anything, most insist, save for perhaps facading fear—their operators standing as scarecrows in the streets. Mazen's abilities trouble such assertions. This view from the checkpoint offers neither exceptions that prove the rule about checkpoint ineffectiveness nor exculpatory evidence that in fact checkpoints successfully engender security in a city long plagued by its lack. Rather, modes of labor at Baghdad's checkpoints are grounded in quotidian repetitions that cultivate ways of knowing and seeing, of how to govern at ground level with astuteness. "Our work is just routine," insists Mazen, his colleagues too. It is a convincing contention precisely because it evinces how he acquires his shrewdness—and how essential this embodied attribute is to Mazen's job, and the state.

RETHINKING BUREAUCRACY

Amman's bakers and Baghdad's soldiers strive to provide subsistence and security. Their daily efforts not only enable the social production of life; they also produce public goods, the res publica that underpins the relationship between governments and the governed (Hull 2012; Chalfin 2014; Bear and Mathur 2015;

Larkin 2013). But their work does not transpire in the drab office buildings often portrayed as the slow-beating heart of bureaucratization. Like firefighters, customs agents, and social workers, bakers and soldiers are "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 1980) who must give content to vague guidelines, strict objectives, and hierarchical directives, often at breakneck speed (Fassin 2013; Jusionyte 2015; Zacka 2017). Bakers and soldiers are not involved in straightforward administrative work. They do not sit behind desks; they rarely push paper. The procedures central to their labor do not invariably mean "ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence," flattening them so to conjure generalizable calculations and conclusions (Graeber 2015, 75). We found their labor to be more intricate and multifaceted than prevalent paradigms led us to expect.

As vastly different capital cities, Amman-Baghdad is not an obvious comparison, to say nothing of the dissimilar professions we contrast. Our juxtaposition does not strive to identify analogous experiences with political authority in neighboring countries. Instead, it tugs at the disparate to help illuminate the agilities keeping the gears of governance well oiled, the work that makes authority seem like it works just well enough. If the state often looks like a machine, what exactly are the machinists doing?

We contemplate and think with this question across five parts. Following engagements with bureaucracy and craft, we offer two discrete ethnographic accounts that jointly help capture how the state comes together. As in our opening vignettes, we deploy the first person singular in these sections to denote respective fieldwork conducted individually. But we return to the plural in the final section, for our readings, appraisals, and assertions throughout are born in concert and of collaboration. We conclude speculatively, charting how embodied skill and tacit knowledge may help us think about bureaucratic assemblages differently.

Long-standing conceptualizations of bureaucracy have largely been informed by "(mis)readings" of Max Weber's germinal *Economy and Society*, wherein bureaucratic capability, in its purest form, is correlated with impartiality, specialization, and stable sets of rules (Mathur 2016). But what Weber offered as a (depressing) set of ideal types meant to further systematic analysis of the increasing prevalence of institutionalized discipline has been all too often construed as a normative archetype. Keenly aware of its heuristic nature, Weber (2019, 343) rejected "any belief that a historical reality can be entirely 'captured'" in the conceptual schemata he put forth. As recent and more perceptive re-readings make clear, Weber's language was always more processual than his North American disciples let on, with an emphasis on the "the flow of events, and the formation of orders from

actions," rather than the tenacity of structures (Tribe 2019, 65; see also Schutz 1967). Political orders, Weber insists, are contingent on the people, things, and governing practices that compose them.

It is precisely such authors and authorizing forces that this essay examines by centering bakers in Amman and soldiers in Baghdad. These enactors of political order complicate analyses of bureaucracy and the labors that comprise its inner workings. By foregrounding the supply of subsidized bread in one city, and the offer of security in another, we aim to show how the labors of street-level workers prove central to the raison d'être of bureaucracy: raison d'état. We neither claim nor suggest, however, that anyone working with public funds is a bureaucrat. Rather, both bakers and soldiers work from and for the state in part through the bureaucratic assemblages in which they are enrolled. They repeatedly labor not in their own name but in that of a collectively validated illusion. As will become clear, the enactment of policy can and often does require both mind and muscle—contingent alignments on which the state effect thrives (Mitchell 1991). Keeping ethnographic attention on the routine dimensions of embodied practice, we foreground the situated dexterities of those charged with carrying out techniques of rule. Rigid, sepia-hued interpretations of what bureaucracies are and who comprises them form part of what our intervention seeks to challenge.

Illuminating ethnographies have debunked the image of modernist bureaucracies as hierarchical institutions that seamlessly gather knowledge, categorize it, render it technical, and then act on the social body in the name of that knowledge (Mathews 2011, 13; Hull 2012; Mathur 2014). Bureaucrats must also negotiate their legal and operational mandates amid value-laden considerations. Laura Bear (2015) traces the ethical conundrums that accompany bureaucrats along the Hooghly River as they seek to sustain the public things central to life along the waterway. Unpacking the improvisations and intimacies through which riverine officials meet the fiscal demands of austerity policy, Bear (2015, 18) shows how friendship matters more than Weberians would expect—so too do the "popular ethics of productivity" through which bureaucrats pursue the public good. Like the artifacts with which they are associated, civil servants cannot easily be categorized as monotonous executors of coherent governmental logics.

Some of the services bureaucrats render are unsteady, some of the materials they must navigate unpredictable. Pushing against accounts that situate government solely "at a distance," Nikhil Anand (2017, 103) traces the daily exertions of *chaviwallas*, municipal officials whose physical efforts implement the water schedule drawn up by engineers in Mumbai's water department. Their primary job is to

turn on and off pipe valves across the city, so that hydraulic pressure is maintained and water flows to the city's residents. That the provision of water is contingent on a host of factors—technology, social capital, even "the performance of the monsoon" (Anand 2017, 50)—reveals the diverse elements needed for Mumbai's hydraulic infrastructure to function. But how are we to conceptualize the necessary if variegated modes of labor without which citizens would lack for the most basic of public goods? What can bakers and soldiers teach us about how states coalesce and the prosaic tasks of government transpire?

This article evinces a Weberian concern for the people "whose action is dedicated to the execution of general directions and substantive commands" (Weber 2019, 338). It foregrounds the complications and contingencies that permeate efforts at bakeries and checkpoints to analyze the skilled improvisations and adroit incisions vital to the provision of public goods. Rather than examine bureaucratic organizations, their hierarchical structures, or how they can disempower, we scour atypical sites of governing and the labors that help comprise them to reveal bureaucratic imbrications integral to the state effect. That bakers and soldiers are not obvious candidates for the study of bureaucracy betrays conceptual constraints. For examining how blueprints of rule are enacted helps show what bureaucracies require to work, and how they work to effect. The execution of government policies relies not only on the existence of guidelines, the delineation of objectives, and the strict demarcation of anonymous authority. It requires something else, an attunement to the world that emerges from laboring through it.

CRAFTING THE STATE

Bureaucrats are rarely portrayed as crafty operators. Across the Middle East, they are more often bemoaned as incompetent, unhelpful sticks in the mud—public employees occupying cushy jobs for too little work and too much pay. But the cliché is an outmoded one. In her exploration of tacit knowledge in Cairo, Julia Elyachar (2012, 78) introduces readers to Mr. Amir, who insists that his "sense (*hiss*) of the market, which he had honed over years," was vital to his work as a lending agent for a public-sector bank. This sense, intangible but indubitable, draws on the tacit knowledge that he has developed over years of having to evaluate risk and calculate value when assessing potential clients. Mr. Amir's methods could "appear chaotic" (Elyachar 2012, 78), but crucial to his many successes were the "unsystematized, unverbalized forms of knowledge that were integrated into the body itself" (Elyachar 2012, 83), ones not easily taught. We find such forms of

bureaucratic labor to rely on modes of learning and knowledge transmission that can be usefully understood through the prism of craft.

These aptitudes are passed down and shared between colleagues and coworkers, a collective bequest aided by time, training, and repetition. The seemingly banal assignments bureaucrats muddle through take particular forms and styles that allow skills to be honed and ingrained through reiteration. Preparation and focus, concentration on task, and attention to situated conditions slowly blend together. In the context of a craft like glassblowing, Erin O'Connor (2017, 224) calls this an "embodied knowledge" that "not only grounds 'practical skills,' but also thinking itself" (see also Sennett 2008). Physical labor, sensory attunement, and cognitive awareness are inseparable in such milieus—engendering dexterities that can only be learned by watching, doing, and replicating.

In her sensorial sojourn through the life of artisanal cheese in the United States, Heather Paxson (2013, 131) argues that craft is located "at the nexus of art and science," operating through synesthesia—the criss-crossing and blending of sensorial knowledge and bodily experience. Paxson's (2013, 136) intervention eschews divisions between head and heart, mind and body, foregrounding as a bodily basis for reason "a particular cultivation of the senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch/tactility, temporality." What matters here is not rote repetition for desired result, but that which is attained and exercised *through* repetition; a "proficiency is gained" when learned intuition and impulse are continually deployed amid pervasive contingency (Paxson 2013, 136). Whereas technical knowledge can be expressed in universal rules, principles, and propositions, craft is the realm of the contextual, of skills and practices not easily codified.

If craft can counterintuitively disabuse us of the "romantic pastoral representations" associated with artisanal cheese (Paxson 2013, 203), we suggest it can push against unromantic and rigid axioms attached to the types of bureaucratic labor that produce public goods. Craft captures forms of knowledge and skill grounded in experience and attentiveness, cunning and alertness, expressed in particular circumstances and spheres of activity. It is in the study of bureaucracy where we find such forms of operation to be underrecognized. While the reception of public services and infrastructures has been the subject of extensive attention, studies of their enactment too often elide the diverse practices, dexterities, and work required to compose them. The purported logics and rationalities guiding bureaucracies, their frequently "idealized self-representations" (Hoag 2011, 84), tend to take precedence over the seemingly banal routines required for their objectives to be achieved. When discretion and canniness are recognized, they are portrayed as

an exercise in intellectual judgment, rarely as indicative of embodied knowledge and disposition. Yet we find the latter central to what we have observed in Amman and Baghdad, and introduce here as *bureaucraft*—skilled, supple, and repetitive forms of labor that enact government and work to provide public goods.

Bakers and soldiers require competencies that are learned, re-learned, and constantly honed through everyday efforts. Brute strength or abstract precision sometimes matter; but most of the time they are of little use and can even prove counterproductive. Creativity and resourcefulness, restrained force and improvisation are far more important—so too responding nimbly to a host of sensory stimuli. Bureaucraft captures particular kinds of exertions that can shed light on the ordinary ways techniques of rule are enacted by those enrolled in bureaucratic assemblages. In using the term, we seek to evoke not moral struggles over the distribution of resources akin to those of witchcraft (Caple James 2012), but the processual activities and agencies that work to "give concrete shape and form to what would otherwise be an abstraction" (Gupta 1995, 378). Bureaucrats are not faceless cogs in all-mighty structures that mechanically discipline and administrate. Taming people, machinery, and materials to make them congenial to the task of government takes a great deal of intricate movement and maneuvering. The state (effect) requires craft.

BUREAUCRAFT

Adept Interventions in Amman

Hosni had an impressive air and a charming disposition. His manners were old-fashioned, gallant but without pretense. As a bakery owner—introduced earlier—Hosni was also a canny businessman. He was a tough employer when needed, but consistently gracious and kind, on which account his workers stomached his high standards. Hosni began his entrepreneurial career with two restaurants, one for sandwiches and snacks, another for longer sit-down meals. Tired of purchasing bread, the gastronomic linchpin of the meals his restaurant served, Hosni decided to streamline his supply chain: he opened his own bakery. Hosni was occasionally smug about subsidized bread, which he described as a loss-leader. "Profit margins are higher on pretty much every other product we sell," he told me when I probed his antipathy. "Plus, you have to deal with all the rules and regulations that surround the subsidy. It's a headache."

Like other public goods, subsidized bread is composed of a wide array of people, processes, and things. Jordan's Ministry of Finance purchases wheat through public tenders that invite bids from competing suppliers. Once a price is agreed

with a qualified bidder, the cereal is sourced from different countries. On arrival in Jordan and after passing phytosanitary inspection, wheat is stored for anywhere between three and nine months, after which a division within the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Supply (MOITS) blends different shipments to obtain ideal protein levels. The resulting wheat mixtures are then transported to one of fourteen privately owned flour mills, where they are made into several types of flour. At the time of my fieldwork (2013–2016), only one of these varieties (colloquially referred to as *muwwahad*)—milled at a 78 percent extraction rate and sold below market price via government support—could be used for the production of subsidized bread. Privately owned bakeries received allocations of *muwwahad* that were highly contentious, as they depended primarily on the estimated number of customers each bread-maker served. Bakeries then produced *khubz 'arabi*, a round and flat loaf about sixteen inches in diameter, on which they made a 7 percent profit. This bread had to be sold at the discounted price of 16 *qirsh* ($0.25) per kilogram to any and all consumers, irrespective of age, income, or nationality. Officials from MOITS regularly inspected bakeries to ensure these subsidy protocols were followed. Bakers and bakery owners regularly touted their involvement in this government program as an altruistic mode of public service.

Implemented in 1974 amid protests at rising commodity prices, Jordan's bread subsidy epitomized a mixed, even haphazard approach to managing the population's well-being at a time when the caring functions of government had come under question. The welfare policy accompanied other measures meant to keep social peace, carefully calibrated to minimize discontent among both business and labor. This was done by improving the citizenry's purchasing power at the government's expense rather than through negotiated wage increases. Subsidies and price controls lowered both the cost of living and the overheads of key industrial inputs (labor, energy), subtly dissipating the antagonisms between employers and employees through the strategic use of foreign aid flowing into Jordanian government coffers from Iraq, the United States, and the Gulf. Broadly popular and consistently defended, the bread subsidy survived drastic cuts to other welfare services over the ensuing decades. Amid such austerity, it served as a haunting reminder of the more interventionist techniques of social government that once strived to improve living conditions across the Hashemite Kingdom. And while preparation and sale by privately owned bakeries certainly depends on the now more heavily promoted strictures of capitalist economic enterprise, subsidized bread production does not cleave neatly to such logics. "You see," Hosni told me when explaining why his bakery continued to make *khubz 'arabi* despite meager returns, "everyone

buys subsidized bread, some people rely on it to survive. So we must offer it. It's our duty."

Hosni was acutely aware that *khubz 'arabi* sustains livelihoods in the city of Amman. His frustrations related less to the goal of bread provision than to the underlying assumptions and approach MOITS deployed to ensure this foodstuff never lacked. "The problem is all the paperwork," he would often moan, believing it unfeasible to model bread-making or forecast production while sitting at a desk. Despite MOITS's attempts to construct an abstract field of observation through which the governmental gaze could travel without impediment, the bakery is a lively domain not easily made amenable to calculation (Martínez 2022). The provision of public goods undoubtedly relies on quantitative techniques, detailed rules, and meticulous regulations—the realm and remit of the *bureau*. But it also requires collaborative modes of labor that cannot always be legislated, decreed, or produced on demand. Bureaucratic toil comes in different shapes and forms.

Hosni employed nine bakers. While these men had varying levels of experience, their bodies all spoke to the trials of their trade—inflamed fingers, callused hands, and the slightest of bumps at the base of their necks. More painful than these visible wounds were the permanently sprained wrists triggered by the repetitive motions required to bake. Of the bread-makers employed by Hosni, Najib was the least vocal in complaining about his physical ailments. Probably because he was also the most careful in his movements, as years of unforgiving labor had taught him how to navigate the pains that accompanied his occupation.

I worked at Hamoudeh's part-time for three months as an unpaid apprentice, participating in what Trevor Marchand (2010, S9) describes as an "exchange of toil for ethnographic knowledge." When it came to making dough, my first week apprenticing under Najib comprised nothing but observation. This first step in the baking process was one that clearly eluded me. I was only trusted to execute other tasks—shape dough, operate the oven—once my competence was confirmed. During the workweek (Sunday–Thursday), dough is made six times a day (occasionally seven), in two-man teams and at two-hour intervals coordinated to meet peak sales hours. The process begins at the refrigerator, where bakers fetch fresh yeast; they proof it by crumbling and mixing the substance with the slightest bit of sugar using the back of a large metal spoon. Once the yeast starts to dissolve—less than a minute later—they add it to a pitcher of lukewarm water. In ten to fifteen minutes, the yeast should foam, froth, and bubble. This rehydration is vital. Fresh yeast has a short shelf life; without confirming its vitality, one runs the danger that dough will not rise.

As the yeast proofs, and becomes increasingly aromatic, flour is procured from the storeroom. It is poured into a large, mechanized mixer, followed by more water. After a brief blend, salt is scooped in, along with another pinch of sugar. The proofed yeast and a bit more water are then added to the mixer. The ingredients are kneaded at a low speed for five minutes, then at medium-high for another fifteen to twenty. The tempo and duration of this process are a bone of contention among connoisseurs. Haste and pace can destroy the flavors emergent in the dough. But no formula or instructions are displayed at Hamoudeh. I was only given a rough approximation of ingredients (twenty-five kilograms of flour, ten of water, three of sugar, three-hundred grams of salt, and a long tab of fresh yeast). Yet no one ever seemed to make reference to this recipe—let alone follow it. Far more important than any set of guidelines was a grasp for how the dough should look, feel, and pulsate.

The early days of my apprenticeship with Najib were spent unlearning fixed rules. I was well-versed with the ingredients and biochemical reactions that underpin a good batch of dough. But familiarity with empirical science was, most of the time, of very little use. The problem with dough was its variability—no two batches were alike. The problem with me was my inflexibility—unable to relinquish strict record-keeping and measurement. The latter two can aid the apprentice baker, but they do not guarantee fluency, and sometimes work against it. Biochemical reactions need to be carefully observed and nurtured, of course. But the organic forces and machineries that compose dough in Amman's small-scale bakeries do not correspond to the systematized procedures and hypersterile conditions that characterize bakeries in the city's burgeoning supermarkets. The key, Najib repeated ad nauseam, was reading and responding quickly to the dough as one worked alongside it.

Responsiveness mattered because temperatures frequently fluctuated. "Feel the dough," Najib told me constantly. "Ask it how much warmth it needs." Machinery made important differences as well. Hamoudeh's mechanized mixer was half the size of the smallest one I had encountered in previous apprenticeships. Manufactured in a local factory, this spiral mixer better minimized heat input into dough so as to develop gluten structure, further altering recipes with which I had become familiar. Despite MOITS's attempts to standardize subsidized flour through detailed parameters for millers, the variable qualities of wheat also made a small but important difference (see Babül 2017, 6; Hetherington 2014, 57). The "better" the wheat, for example, the more absorbent and permeable the flour, making slightly less yeast necessary. An initial error often meant hurried reductions or

increases in the amount of water; lasting missteps could weaken the dough as the fermentation lost its force. I asked often about such variations, repeating to myself what I was told or hurrying to jot down Najib's observations on a notepad. But he was always quick to discourage such actions. "Concentrate on the dough," he'd sigh. "Watch it, smell it, listen to it."

Najib, I later realized, was trying to instill in me an attentiveness to what Paxson (2013, 144) calls an "entire ecology of productive agency," without which bureaucraft runs askew. Always eager to seek the solace of pen and paper, Najib would routinely creep up behind me and, with a delicate touch to my elbow and a musical, narcotic whisper in my ear, remind me to get my fingers back in the dough, my nostrils closer to the mixer. He knew well that I needed to learn to make dough amid a variety of climactic conditions and with a range of components and machinery. His goal, in teaching apprentices to "read" dough in the making, is to have them gain an intimate understanding of its possible permutations. Flour and yeast, water and salt, are capricious, fickle ingredients in constant motion; their agency could only be determined through their "intra-action" (Barad 2007, 33). Of course, such an approach should not be mistaken for a lack of rigor. Hamoudeh was well known for its excellent *khubz 'arabi*, and Hosni took quality control seriously, as it could affect not only his bakery but his other businesses. Najib's goal was to produce a reliable, appetizing foodstuff amid ever-fluctuating circumstances—similarity without symmetry.

Only after some weeks did it become clear that technical comprehension took a backseat to developing sensory knowledges that allowed the apprentice baker to interpret the machinations of the dough as it was made. Najib's central premise was that only this firsthand, visceral acquaintance with dough could nurture the quick responses and speedy modifications required to prepare a batch successfully. Years of baking had taught him that recipes could never offer precise instructions, only the fuzziest of outlines. One had to read dough, to be receptive to its potentials, rather than striving to systematize its possibilities. To achieve consistency in form and flavor amid ever-shifting conditions only partially amenable to human control, one had to embrace uncertainty, the distributed nature of agency (Bennett 2020, 79). "Be patient and kind with the ingredients," Najib would say, "otherwise they'll turn on you." Preparing good dough that was ready to be kneaded—pliable, moist without being wet—demanded attuning oneself to the multispecies forces that work to compose it, a skill set biased far more toward vibrancy than instrumentality.

When we were first introduced, Najib exuded cigarette smoke and a subtle self-assurance—the type of man a flour-filled aura grows around. He chose his trade not to obtain money or things, trivial pursuits others chased. Baking bread was about feeding people, he stressed, as assured in the value of his profession as a priest or a plumber. Conscious, like his boss, that the bakery's rhythms and routines determined how subsidized bread policy was enacted, Najib strove to ensure *khubz 'arabi* was both available and appetizing. He spoke of his job in terms that would be familiar to students of bureaucracy—Najib considered himself a watchful purveyor of public resources. His mission was to ensure "everyone can eat good, cheap bread," ideally "that no one in Amman lack for food or other basic goods." It is a state of subsistence pithily captured in a phrase he often used to impart that life would be fine when, "The bread is baked and the water stored [*Al-khubz makhbuz wa-l-mai fi-l-kuz*]." But it was the work itself, Najib's daily grind, that would perplex enthusiasts of documents, files, and paperwork.

Making subsidized bread, becoming a deft elaborator of dough, requires putting an array of organic and technological forces into productive play. It is not just adroitness with one's hands or technologies that matters. Adeptness here looks similar to that explored by Jessica Barnes (2022, 151) in *Staple Security*, where making essential foodstuffs available requires not imposing oneself on materials but learning to manage "a complex network of interactions," so that wheat can become bread. Master bakers know both the protocol and the practicalities; their bodily competence has accumulated to the point where making dough becomes a matter of reflexive feel under variable conditions, one that barely requires deliberation (Herzfeld 2004). For the apprentice, learning to make dough required laboriously cultivating the senses so as to deploy the ideal means of intermediation, following currents and energies to work "from within the world, not upon it" (Ingold 2000, 347). Bureaucraft here is tacit but teachable, a collective inheritance and savoir faire that escapes statistics and standardization, reliant as it is on the vitality of tools, technologies, and people.

Subsidized bread is undoubtedly an object of management intimately imbricated with biopolitical forms of rule. But it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a life-giving resource made through daily practices that are methodical, nimble, and frequently proficient. Amman's bakers are revelatory in this respect. They make clear the tacit knowledge and sensory aptitudes required by those who work to provide public goods. These are, rather plainly, dispositions that cannot be inculcated via rules, regulations, or instruction manuals. They require stimuli, encouragements, and inducements that are gradual, steady, and subtle, more crafted than

coerced. As they nourish residents, Jordan's bakers draw on and generate forms of life, mediating a swirl of agents and agencies to ensure that no one lacks for *khubz*.

My goal here is not to idealize a working landscape in which underpaid bakers prepare a basic foodstuff that works to prevent starvation, in what amounts to the most minimal of welfare services extended by an unabashedly authoritarian regime. Nor is it to romanticize not-quite-alienated forms of labor as an antidote to industrial production and dramatic socioeconomic inequalities. Rather, it is to forefront just some of the "essential ingredients" that contribute to forces of rule, while also scrutinizing the modes of labor crucial to their enactment (Lea 2020, 7). Whatever a Jordanian bakery's size, there are more actors at play than conventional frameworks tend to consider. Bureaucratic worlds are complex ecologies whose intricacies tend to lie buried beneath the veneer of technocratic omnipotence. Bread governs, of course, but it requires laborious preparation.

Ways of Seeing in Baghdad

Strands of hair are poking out from under Mazen's beige helmet. He needs a cut and he knows it. It is a slow evening at the checkpoint. He takes advantage of the trickle of traffic, strolling to the nearest barber he frequents—then returns minutes later. "He was too busy to see me," Mazen moans to his fellow soldiers standing at the checkpoint. But before they can reply, he moves to more pressing matters. "Listen, the commander called the head of our checkpoint and complained that we aren't checking anyone, that we're not stopping any cars." The calm and quiet we are all experiencing is not a matter of circumstance. It is being manufactured by the soldiers themselves, who are apparently neglecting their responsibilities. "*Yalla*, let's move."

The two soldiers I am standing with at the secondary vehicle search are slow to react to Mazen's order. They stretch out their on-duty loitering for as long as they can while Mazen mobilizes the others. He hollers ahead to the two soldiers manning the front of the checkpoint about fifteen meters away, watching more than inspecting the cars passing through. "Guys!" Mazen shouts, adding a purse-lipped whistle that makes their heads turn. "Send us some folks, would you?! Send us some!" he barks. His order is accompanied by a gesture, as he rapidly taps his left shoulder three times with his three right forefingers. The signal lends hierarchical imprimatur to his directive: the order has come from an officer, from a man with a powerful epaulette. The soldiers get into position and begin anew to carry out what each of them have expressed to me is *shugl routiney*—routine work.

Checkpoints along Baghdad's main thoroughfares are composed of two spaces. All drivers and passengers encounter the first. The front of the checkpoint is divided into two or three lanes, depending on the width of the road, through which vehicles pass. The other space is a secondary search area. Security personnel follow a limited set of learned practices while manning (always men) the front of the checkpoint—what soldiers mainly refer to when describing their *routiney* exertions. They look to see if vehicle windows are tinted (which are illegal unless the vehicle belongs to a government ministry, public institution, or political party/parastatal armed group). They glance at the front bumper to ensure a license plate is present and legible. Soldiers also expect those passing through to behave according to motor skills learned through years of checkpoint interactions—dial car music down, shut headlights off, flick cabin lights on, slow speed to a crawl. Those who do not follow these formulae, which long ago became knee-jerk reflexes among Baghdadi drivers approaching checkpoints, are often directed to the secondary search area.

A more active set of probing practices occurs at the secondary search, ones that center around a line of political-geographic questioning. Soldiers often ask drivers and passengers where they are going, from where they are coming, and if they are carrying any weapons. These queries are grounded in an ethnosectarian logic that took shape during identitarian-based violence that gripped Baghdad in 2006 and 2007. Throughout this period, Iraqi security personnel operating checkpoints—backed by U.S. occupying forces grasping to regain control of the capital—would press vehicle occupants on their movements.

A primary goal was to determine whether travelers were departing from and/or entering into neighborhoods understood by checkpoint personnel as not matching a traveler's own sect. Imagined sectarian geographies were thus deployed by these personnel as a basis for controlling vehicular mobility across the city (Deeb and Harb 2013; Nucho 2016; Fregonese 2019). Residents risking travel had to have exceptionally good reason to traverse different districts, to cross urban circumscriptions; put differently, perceived social-spatial mismatch often suggested to security personnel that travelers' movements might be motivated by sectarian malice. Most fixed (*thabita*) checkpoints have slowly been removed in recent years, though a select few still remain. Many others have been converted into federal police outposts occupying sidewalks and manned with police officers at the ready to launch temporary "flying" checkpoints (*murabata*) should they be commanded to do so. Interrogatory practices still persist. Identity cards can be checked, with names often judged indicative of ethnosectarian cleavage. Trunks are sometimes

inspected, though most travelers are eventually permitted to pass without further disturbance or delay.

In 2018, during and after my in situ observation at two checkpoints—one in Mansour district and another in Karada district—the routines that helped comprise these sites were the target of acerbic condemnation by the city's residents. Some criticisms were mundane, others struck at the heart of public expectations of government anywhere. Checkpoints can cause long traffic delays, triggering eye rolls, heavy sighs, and unequivocal declarations about deficient air-conditioning systems. The security personnel who populate them are often bemoaned as poorly educated, even as they wield consequential control over basic movements across the city. But such frustrations are grounded in broader disillusionment with these penetrating architectures of security—once numbering close to 1,500 (ICG 2010)—that appear to have little effect engendering that which they purport to instill. Feelings of apoplexy directed toward checkpoints are spawned and spread in an urban setting where an array of public services, security being only one, have proved inadequate for so long.

These widespread grievances are ambivalent, sometimes in outright tension with one another (Martínez 2023). Through periods of urban calm, residents criticize checkpoints as a bad joke or "tricks" (*klawat*). Yet during swellings of violence, with residents yearning for remedies to quell inescapable insecurity, checkpoints are lamented not as nuisance but let-down, neglect, even negligence. Security practices are understood as necessary, at times even endorsed, as long as they "work" or are deemed "successful;" according to most Baghdadis, their city's checkpoints do not and are not. Public certitude that these installations amount to nothing begets burrowing into how they function. Figuring out what exactly they do does not mean refuting what Baghdadis know to be true about the checkpoints with which they have lived for so long. Instead, dwelling on how checkpoints operate through the labor and know-how of the men who control them suggests their situated work remains integral to the construction of political authority, even when it is deplored.

Labor at the checkpoint must wrestle with the circulation of social and political capital attached to vehicles. An instructive example is the Toyota Land Cruiser GXR—colloquially known by an acronym-cum-phonetic: *jexara* (pl. *jexarat*). Weighty sport utility vehicles, most *jexarat* that move through Baghdad's streets are white, usually darkened only by jet-black tinted windows. Sometimes their doors are bullet proof, depending on the importance of their occupants. These

people are invariably politicians and senior ministry officials, leaders of parastatal armed factions once known as militias, or wealthy businessmen.

As I stood with Sadiq at the checkpoint in Mansour, a *jexara* slowly rolled to a stop. Sadiq's upright, soldierly disposition quickly shifted. He turned relaxed yet also deferential. Inside the vehicle sat a tribal sheikh from Anbar province. Sadiq knew this from the license plate bearing the province's name and the plump shape and chiefly demeanor of the *jexara*'s most important passenger—to say nothing of his accompanying security detail. Sadiq leaned lightly on the open window. "How are you all?" he asked politely. The sheikh offered his own pleasantries, inquiring if Sadiq and his colleagues needed anything. Sadiq placed his hand over his heart and thanked the sheikh for his concern. The *jexara* slowly pulled away.

Sadiq is a small man with airs of confidence. He often engages his fellow soldiers in brief conversations, sometimes about the dire climate conditions in the southern and rural parts of the country, from where he and many of his colleagues hail. Days into my time at the checkpoint, I angle to press him with a question or two, starting with a basic query about what he is looking for as vehicles pass through the checkpoint. "You have to look at people, you can tell who to stop by their look [*shikilhom*]," Sadiq begins somewhat vaguely. "The car matters too. Take the Charger for instance." He is making reference to the Dodge-made vehicle popularized in Iraq after 2003. "There actually aren't many Chargers in Baghdad. They come from elsewhere, from the provinces. So we know to stop them, and check them, ask drivers to get out of the car, sometimes pat them down." On slow approach to the checkpoint, a vehicle's make becomes the first marker shaping how soldiers will interact with its occupants. Cars and SUVs are not simply indicators of economic status. They also help soldiers place and make sense of the political significance of the people traveling in them, in turn informing their interrogatory routines.

At first glance, both Sadiq's visual work and his description of it appear ambiguous, blurry, filled with speculation about car and class, territory and even tribe. But his mundane exertions and explanations draw attention to how "situated knowledges," as Donna Haraway (1988) calls them, are inherent to his labor. Pushing back against "unlocatable" claims to objectivity, Haraway (1988, 583) deploys vision as metaphor to convincingly argue that ways of knowing should be grounded in "particular and specific embodiment," partial perspectives that offer clairvoyance precisely because they are fragmentary (Haraway 1988, 582). Haraway is compelling here not because Sadiq, a foot soldier with a middle-school education, offers his own subjugated standpoint to which Haraway herself is so

committed; an infantryman tasked with governing, Sadiq is hardly her muse. Sadiq and his colleagues indeed appear to occupy the street as a standing force representing a singular response to that which threatens their claim to monopoly violence. But they are directed to carry out other kinds of repetitive work precisely because the claim to exclusive authority is so tenuous and shaky, so frequently contested, often so unconvincing.

Of at least equal consequence then is *how* Sadiq sees, who he is looking for, what hints he is trained to detect—the minutiae that help comprise both "the violence implicit in [his] visualising practices" (Haraway 1988, 585) and the deference to other political powers passing through, the avoidance of violence at almost all costs. His efforts rest on "modes and objects of perception" that constitute what Allen Feldman (2006, 429) calls a "scopic regime," seeing practices that help generate ruling practices. Seeing is a governmental technique, but not in unadulterated form (Scott 1998; Hammami 2019). The state "requires a knowledge tuned to reasonance [*sic*]" (Haraway 1988, 588). For the state to work at and through the checkpoint, soldiers must know what to look for, a skill attained and sharpened through situated sweat.

Cars passing through signal social-political status, mobile capital that invariably informs routine checkpoint procedures. When Da'ish—also known as ISIL or the Islamic State—held control of huge portions of territory in western and northern Iraq (2014–2017), vehicles with license plates from Da'ish-held provinces were commonly stopped at checkpoints. These vehicles were not only pulled over as they moved between provinces but also within Baghdad, as security personnel were tasked with fortifying the capital by monitoring movement across it—just as they were a decade before. Sadiq's mention of the Charger is particularly noteworthy because the vehicle is often used by drivers making long journeys across Iraq, transporting people and light goods. Sadiq knows the *jexara* is a carrier of influence; his routines adjust with deference. But when seeing the Charger—or merely recalling it—he alludes to broader conditions of insecurity as justification for his closer scrutiny of the vehicle and its occupants. Iraq's vehicular geographies are closely implicated in checkpoint labor and soldierly competence. But this know-how also brings into stark relief the longevity of the conditions through which it is attained and passed on, and the endurance of checkpoint practices for which informed adroitness is requisite. History weighs heavily on the checkpoint—and on bureaucraft itself.

Along with federal police officers, traffic cops, and other security personnel, soldiers in Baghdad have for years proven central to what Ilana Feldman (2008, 3)

calls "tactical government"—a mode of rule shaped by crisis rather than long-term planning, one that "presumes little stability in governing conditions." These men are imbricated in the "form, shape and habits of daily practices" that shape the "tenacity" of government in Iraq's capital (I. Feldman 2008, 13). But Baghdad's checkpoints, and the labor that helps comprise them, also trouble Feldman's distinction between "crisis services" marked by "exceptionality" and more mundane, "everyday services" like road construction (I. Feldman 2008, 157). For these installations are both temporary sites of control during supposed crises *and* unexceptional sites of longer-term rule. Tactical governing in Iraq holds any binary in abeyance; emergencies are unremarkable, crises commonplace. Put differently, checkpoint labor is liminal. The range of undertakings at checkpoints helps make their very existence initially and recurringly possible.

When vehicles are directed to the secondary search point, soldiers can pose questions tinged with identitarian inquiry that ultimately elide space and sect. But questions of where someone is going or from where they are coming are not asked mindlessly. Nor are these routine queries inquisitions. They are qualified interactions saturated with discretion and capriciousness. Soldiers often ask these stock questions and usually receive banal answers. But of equal concern to them are a host of other social cues, gestures, and commentaries from passers-through—careful if fleeting considerations of what is not said, what is left out, and the ways in which drivers and passengers variably encounter and esteem their exertions.

Nibras is hardly chatty. He is more interested in completing his shift without fuss or incident. I am thus struck, when I am with him at the secondary search, by the ways in which he drags out conversation with drivers and passengers under his inspection. In one instance he holds up a group of young men in a new Nissan sedan. The car is stuffed with giddy testosterone; one lad in the back is trying to keep himself from laughing. Nibras is annoyed, almost insulted, and asks for the laugher's identification. "What's so funny? Is there something up ahead that's making you giggle?" Before the young man can answer, Nibras continues scanning the shoddily laminated document. "This identity card, it's not the original. It's a photocopy. Where's the original?" The young man's smile disappears as he realizes he may have a problem: "It's with my parents, for safekeeping," he replies in a halting but insistent tone. Nibras inhales, clearly frustrated, but finds the answer sufficient: "Then say that from the beginning," he admonishes—and then flicks his head leftward, allowing the boys through.

Baghdadis often maintain that checkpoints lack rhyme or reason, that they function "depending on the mood" (*hasb mazajhom*) of the security personnel

populating them. Such moods are in turn affected by a host of unpredictable factors, from the day's weather conditions and heat index to whether a soldier is having marital problems. But the dispositions of the young men in the sedan—long accustomed to being singled out at checkpoints because of age and gender intersections—also impact how Nibras does his job. Their initially casual demeanor reinforce the extent to which such checkpoint interactions have conditioned their urban mobilities; they have been here many times before. But Nibras too, maybe far more often. In dressing them down, he warns the young men that they best not get too comfortable. He does so by knowing where to press and how to irk, leaning on the expectation that they possess proper identification to pass through the city. At work here is bureaucraft, a calibration between duty and discernment that helps weave the net of authority in which these men have briefly but habitually been caught up.

Mazen, Sadiq, Nibras, and their fellow soldiers have slowly honed a *hiss* or "sense" for suspicion over years standing at checkpoints in Baghdad (Elyachar 2012). This sense has been acquired through procedures long used at these sites, and to which residents have long been subject. Without the monotony of inspecting travelers during their *shugl routiney*, soldiers could not have crafted judicious tactics critical to how they do their jobs. Their seven- or ten- or sometimes fourteen-day rotations consist of long hours and double shifts manning checkpoints, exhausting work that also remains a target of public ire. Common criticisms of checkpoints are largely warranted, but less because of those who man them. Lives lost to years of security breakdowns have ignited anger and contempt toward these installations, which barely burden those with contacts and capital. Still, insisting checkpoints are mere chicanery occludes the practices of authority and compliance they work to produce and reproduce. The assertion also precludes determining how soldiers come to see and know, and how they deploy their situated knowledge to help pull off a "god trick" (Haraway 1988, 589)—one more commonly known as the state.

TOWARD A STATELY CONCLUSION

Bureaucracies are mercurial. They rely on the slow accrual of sociomaterial processes, documentary forms, and technopolitical relations. Their protean components are sometimes material constituents, such as those that bakers need to make bread. In other circumstances, volatility transpires affectively—like the fluctuating moods soldiers both carry and generate (Martínez and Sirri 2020). And yet in each case, bureaucrafters wrestle constantly with the mutable—taming

temperamentality into the public goods on which so many citizens rely. With or without fixed areas of responsibility, rule-bound methods, and regimented procedures, bureaucracy is riddled with skilled improvisation, peppered by shrewd extemporization.

By linking bureaucracy to craft, and thinking through them across two very different spaces and cities, we have sought to bring into relief the ways in which soldiers and bakers are state-makers. Our juxtaposition insists that central to any state story are the ways in which those who appear to be background characters in fact prove central to the plot. Their exertions musn't disappear (McKittrick 2021, 15). For the vibrant labors that work at once to make and remake the state can also impel, now and again, a strategic collapse or a tactical short circuit (Harney and Moten 2013, 145). That the routine practices of soldiers and bakers work to create such a thing as the state should help disabuse anyone of the suggestion that our intervention seeks solely to redeem the efforts of the men we engage, spend time with, sometimes work alongside, and even befriend. Their efforts receive our examination precisely because they are helping to engender that which so many citizens in these two cities criticize as inadequate and absent, denounce as intrusive and coercive.

The unlike comparison we offer also alerts us to what Rebecca Bryant (2021, 59) insists are "ambiguities in the definition of supposedly real stateness." The ambiguities arise in part from desires and expectations around the provision of public goods—subsistence and security being only two. But in our cases, it is not so much "fakeness" (Bryant 2021, 58) that is leaned on, produced, or even invariably accepted amid performative work enacting stateness. Rather, privileging the exhausting labor of those "jerry-building" the very thing with which so many citizens are disillusioned turns our attention to how bureaucrafters are themselves ambiguous functionaries whose work exhorts them to implement directives with deftness. Put differently, if the state "never quite becomes what it should be" (Bryant 2021, 58), one way to come to grips with how it constantly comes up short is to explore the slow slogging away always occurring in the crevices of our collective inadequacy.

Public goods are central to stateness. But such provisions are also provisional. Accretions abound, intransigence can be a product of materials, human brokers, and more. Adept means of intervention need not come in the forms so often assumed. Politics can also be a matter of toil and exertion that orders reality in slightly different ways—a pungent loaf of supple bread, a sympathetic smile to an exhausted driver passing through.

ABSTRACT

Bakers and soldiers strive to provide subsistence and security to the residents of Amman and Baghdad. Neither set of actors is involved in straightforward administrative work; they do not sit behind desks, they rarely push paper. They are instead enrolled in bureaucratic assemblages colored with an altogether different hue. This article dissects the embodied dexterities deployed by bakers and soldiers as they carry out their jobs at bakeries and checkpoints dotted across the Jordanian and Iraqi capitals. Drawing on ethnographic work, we develop the concept of bureaucraft to analyze the variegated modes of labor without which citizens would lack for some of the most basic of public goods. Taming people and things to make them congenial to the state effect takes a great deal of shrewd maneuvering. We strive to demonstrate that it requires craft. [state; bureaucracy; bureaucraft; Amman; Baghdad; bakery; checkpoint]

NOTES

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1. This article uses a simplified version of the IJMES system of transliteration for Arabic words, and pseudonyms to de-identify our interlocutors.

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