

Rethinking the Political Economy of Industrial and Special Economic Zones from MENA

Online Workshop – May 26, 2025; In-person Workshop – November 2025

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is home to more than 100 special economic zones (SEZs). From Tanger Med to the Suez Canal and Jebel Ali, different forms of SEZs have long structured national and regional economies. These extra-territorialities assign advantageous regulation to particular sites in order to accelerate domestic economic growth, attract foreign direct investment (FDI), and foster local industrial ecosystems through innovation and employment generation. As central infrastructures of contemporary capitalism, these SEZs geographically pin the region to uneven global structures of commerce, industry, and finance, with the promise of enhancing international competitiveness. Beyond their economic prerogatives, SEZs constitute social and political infrastructures that have radically reshaped state sovereignty, labor-capital relations and regimes, and territorial arrangements in the MENA.

The onset of economic liberalization in the late 1960s and 70s ushered in the proliferation of free trade zones (FTZs) and export processing zones (EPZs)—now labelled as special economic zones (SEZs)—in MENA and across the world. Although these zones suspend state regulations on labor, trade, and manufacturing, their establishment has historically strengthened domestic authoritarian regimes, both in the region and globally. SEZs, and more particularly EPZs designed to promote export-oriented industrialization, bolstered the mandates of political leaders who sought to depart from the import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies that had dominated the industrial policies of the post-colonial nation-state. The creation of SEZs thus became a central tool for the neoliberal turn in MENA, establishing selective linkages between the region and the global economy. Yet despite their prominence, the heavily securitized and secluded nature of most SEZs means that their particular production, trade, and labor regimes have often remained opaque to researchers and removed from public scrutiny.

The workshop grounds these questions in the long and diverse histories of “the zone” as a spatial and legal construct that reconfigures geographies of global capitalism: this includes the industrial zone, the free trade zone, the export processing zone, the logistics zone, etc. In doing so, it proposes to historicize the zone within the political economic trajectory and development of capitalism in the MENA region, embedding such analysis in a broader consideration of its political legacies across the Global South. In addition, the workshop

considers how industrial and special economic zones in the MENA region have been continually poised as solutions to enhance integration in global value and supply chains, and are thus inextricably tied to broader political economic agendas and uneven economic geographies. Finally, the workshop examines how the spatio-legal regimes of SEZs intersect with state governance and shape the gendered and racialized international division of labor, reconfiguring labor regimes and relations of work across the MENA region.

From Algiers to Port Said and Aqaba, the workshop brings together research exploring how states, private investors, and international institutions have transformed the MENA region into an archipelago of different zones; and how future visions of growth and development remain tied to the creation of new SEZs. The workshop also invites contributions analyzing logistics and transport corridors that provide linkages between different extra-territorialities within and across the region. The workshop will center cross-regional comparison and reflection, opening multi-lingual dialogue between researchers concerned with industrial zones and SEZs from the Mashreq to the Maghreb. It also highlights how a close-up engagement with SEZs reorients our gaze to material, financial, and human flows, bringing to light the multiple global connections that are constitutive to the contemporary MENA and defy any bounded conception of the region.

The workshop will approach industrial and special economic zones through the following four thematic axes:

- ✦ **The History of Industrial and Special Economic Zones:** How did industrial and special economic zones historically develop in the MENA region? What were these zones' political economic plans and priorities? How did the shift from post-colonial, national import substitution industrialization (ISI) to export-oriented industrialization policies transform geographies of industrial production in the region? How does the historical trajectory of industrial and special economic zones in MENA follow, depart from, or challenge common narratives about the global development of SEZs?
- ✦ **The Political Economy of SEZs for Industrial Production:** What are the spatial, financial, and legal architectures of different SEZs and what forms of regulatory or jurisdictional exemptions do they produce? How do particular financial flows and global corporate structures shape the geographies and productive regimes of SEZs in the MENA? How are MENA SEZs entangled with, or can be understood as the product of, particular (geo-)political arrangements and global trade policies? How do SEZs alter performances of state power and sovereignty, as well as alliances between corporate and political actors?

- ✦ **Labor-Capital Relations in SEZs for Industrial Production:** How do SEZs contribute to the deregulation of labor, both within and beyond the zones' confines? What forms of labor mobility do particular SEZs for industrial production engender and with what consequences? What do SEZs in the MENA reveal about the gendered and racialized international division of labor in contemporary capitalism? How do the zones as spatio-legal devices come to function as technologies of discipline and control? What kinds of social relationships, multi-ethnic solidarities, and cosmopolitan connections do these zones foster? In turn, how do particular labor regimes shape the physical set-up and confines, as well as socio-economic relations of different SEZs over time, and to what effect?
- ✦ **Trade and Transport Corridors, Infrastructures, and Logistics:** How are different MENA SEZs positioned in global value and supply chains? How do geographies of planned or existing SEZs relate to diverse trade, transport, and logistics corridors in the region? How are such geographies of production and circulation connected to national and international security policies and risks of disruption? What role do SEZs play in the reconfiguration of borders in this region?

Workshop Details and Timeline:

The workshop is organized in two parts—consisting of a virtual meeting and an in-person paper workshop—and will result in the joint publication of a Working Paper Series on Industrial Zones in MENA, to be published through the **Pathways Beyond Neoliberalism: Voices from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)** project, based at the American University in Cairo (AUC).

To participate in the workshop, please submit a **300-word abstract** by **April 23, 2025** through this link: <https://forms.gle/3aQphix2nCYtVesS6>. If possible, try to speak explicitly to one or several of the thematic axes our CfP identifies. Please submit your abstract, alongside a provisional paper title and a short author bio through the same form.

Abstracts can be submitted in **Arabic, English, or French** and translation (**AR-EN and EN-AR only**) will be provided throughout the workshop.

- **Deadline:** April 23, 2025
- **Announcement to selected workshop participants:** May 9, 2025
- **Virtual meeting of selected participants:** May 26, 2025
- **Paper submission deadline (4,000-6,000 words):** September 30, 2025 + beginning of paper peer review process.
- **In-person workshop in Cairo:** The event will take place in early November at the AUC Tahrir Campus, as part of the Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa (PEMENA) Conference, with the exact timing to be confirmed.

Travel to/from and accommodation in Cairo will be funded for all selected workshop participants and there are no workshop or conference fees to be paid.

*The series is co-edited by **Katharina Grueneisl** (University of Nottingham and Associated Researcher at L'institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain (IRMC) and **Ingy Higazy** (Pathways' Research Manager).

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