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Cities and Political Change: How Young Activists in Beirut Bred an Urban Social Movement

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Abstract

The paper investigates how young activists in Beirut bred an urban social movement. It is organized in two parts: the first discusses the context of urban policies and governance in Beirut, and how it has generated a dismal state of public services, where youth groups are excluded from the city and the public sphere. The second examines how two generations of urban activists created a diversity of groups eager to preserve the liveability of their city and their shared spaces. Three success stories of young urban activists demonstrate the formation of new modes of collective action and mobilization. The trigger for the consolidation of these modes of action into an urban social movement is the collapse of a key public service – garbage collection and management –, which translated into widespread protests (al-Hirak) as well as a successful municipal campaign (Beirut Madinati).

Keywords: Lebanon | Youth | Political movements | Urban movements

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates how young activists in Beirut bred an urban social movement. It is organized in two parts: in the first, I discuss the context of urban policies and governance in Beirut, and how it has generated a dismal state of public services, where youth groups are excluded from the city and the public sphere. In the second part, I examine how two generations of urban activists led up to the formation of a diversity of groups eager to preserve the liveability of their city and their shared spaces. I narrate three success stories of young urban activists that demonstrate the formation of new modes of collective action and mobilization. I also show how the collapse of a key public service – garbage collection and management – led to the consolidation of an urban social movement, which translated into widespread protests (al-Hirak), as well as a successful municipal campaign (Beirut Madinati), which received one-third of the votes of the city against the sectarian political elite who won the election by a small margin of 11 percent. The paper's data come from conversations I held with dozens of young urban activists, as well as participant observation (given that as one of these urban activists I participated in several campaigns, including Beirut Madinati), in addition to a desk review of social media entries and online material.

1. URBAN POLICIES AND GOVERNANCE IN LEBANON

Planning in Lebanon is operated via top-down policies, decided by a few in a small number of public institutions that operate without consultation with the population. The Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR, established in 1977 to replace the Ministry of

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Planning) is a public agency that reports directly to the council of ministers, and that today centralizes all international grants and loans. It mainly decides on and manages infrastructural projects across Lebanon, ensuring their execution through subcontracting. The Directorate General of Urbanism (DGU) is part of the Ministry of Public Works, and suffers from major limitations with regard to human and financial resources, rendering it an obsolete institution notorious for its corruption and inefficiency, as well as its incapacity. Its main function is approving master plans – conceived according to obsolete physical planning guidelines, and building permits. Thus, no central institution is effectively conceiving and implementing spatial planning policies across the Lebanese territory. The CDR issued a National Physical Master Plan in 2005, which serves as a broad reference for spatial planning and regional development experts and planners, but lacks clear implementation mechanisms at regional and local scales (CDR 2005).

Local and regional governments have large margins of manoeuvre when it comes to spatial planning, but weak resources.[2] Only large and medium municipalities and municipal federations are able to perform well in terms of service provision. Municipalities are directly elected in Lebanon, and attract a relatively large percentage of the population to the ballot boxes. The first post-war elections took place in 1998, and have been occurring every six years. The number of municipalities and municipal federations has been increasing, reaching about 1,100 municipalities and 50 municipal federations that group two-thirds of them (Harb and Atallah 2015:191). Some local and regional governments – especially in medium-sized towns – have been developing creative interventions on the spatial planning level that are inclusive of youth (such as Jezzine, Ghobeyri, Baakline, Dinniyye, Aley). Their mayors are engaging youth in decision-making through establishing committees on specific tasks, encouraging them to become more involved in local politics and development. This practice is worth observing as municipalities could be interesting leviers of political and social change, more accessible to youth than national-level politics – although central-level policies do keep constraining the margins of manoeuvre of local and regional governments.

This centralized, fragmented and inefficient urban governance structure in Lebanon leads unsurprisingly to dysfunctional urban policies that have dire impacts on young people's inclusion in the city. In what follows, I discuss three sets of urban policies that have significant impact on the livelihood of youth: affordable housing and basic service provision, mobility patterns, and public space. I demonstrate how each sector is operating in ways that marginalize young people from their neighbourhoods, as well as how they dematerialize and depoliticize youth's relationship to the city.

1.1 Affordable Housing and Basic Service Provision

There is no public or affordable housing in Lebanon. Some failed attempts were tried in the 1950s and 1960s.[3] The *Caisse de l'Habitat* provides loans for middle-income families who can demonstrate their bankability. Private real-estate developers and contractors provide housing to people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, according to a caricatured geographic gradient, providing housing for the rich in the capital city and its relatively near

[2] The next paragraph builds on our work in Harb and Atallah (2015), which provides more details on municipal governance, and local and regional spatial planning initiatives.

[3] For more details on affordable housing in Lebanon, see Fawaz and Sabah (2015).

peripheries, and for the poor in its distant peripheries and towns. A lot of poor people do inhabit several neighbourhoods in the central city and its suburbs – namely dwellers in informal settlements and refugee camps, amounting to more than 20 percent of municipal Beirut according to 2003 estimates (Fawaz and Peillen 2003:29) – a proportion that has certainly increased significantly today with the influx of Syrian refugees. Those people, and their youth, live in grim, insecure, crowded and unhygienic conditions, with limited access to basic services and public space.

Young people inhabit their parents' house until they get married, some even then remaining in the family house because of the financial constraints of purchasing or renting their own place. The cost of one square metre in municipal Beirut averages 4,680 dollars[4] – a figure that is unaffordable for most youth, given that the minimum monthly wage is 450 dollars. Rent is also very pricey, averaging 1,255 dollar/month for a one-bedroom apartment, which only the well-heeled can afford.[5] There is no rent-control policy in Lebanon, and the few subsidized apartments in Beirut, Tripoli and Saida are now progressively going to be phased out because of the new rent law that has abolished rent-controlled apartments (Marot 2014).

Additionally, access to basic services such as electricity, water and internet are not effectively secured through public means. Public electricity is not provided 24/7, and electricity cuts can reach up to 8-10 hours per day in some areas. Water (for home use and potable) is also not available on a daily basis, especially after the 2013-14 draught. Internet speed is notorious for being very slow in Lebanon. The recent garbage crisis in the country also reveals the absolute failure of the Lebanese government in securing basic service management of the waste sector. All these poor public services lead to the proliferation and fragmentation of service provision by an unregulated private sector, often closely connected to sectarian political parties that benefit financially from their monopoly over the provided service, and their ability to impose it on the neighbourhood by force (Verdeil 2013). Private providers of electricity, bottled water and internet sell their services to people at exorbitant fees, and at unmonitored and poor quality levels. Some people elaborate their own alternative forms of accessing service at cheaper prices: some drive up to the river source to fill their water bottles, others install a battery-operated electric system, and still others free-ride the neighbour's Wi-Fi system. However, overall, people are captive to the private providers' system of service distribution, and have limited alternative options.

1.2 Mobility

In terms of spatial mobility, Lebanon has no effective shared transportation system. The few buses that operate in the main cities of the Beirut agglomeration are in poor condition, and do not follow an effective time schedule. Less than 20 percent of people resort to some form of shared transportation (Mohtar and Samaha 2016). Many youth appreciate vans (small buses that can carry twelve to fifteen people) for connections between neighbourhoods, towns and cities – a system that is more reliable, faster and affordable. The operators of these vehicles are closely affiliated to political elites who benefit financially from their returns, and who

[4] The Lebanese pound is the official currency in Lebanon but the economy has been dollarized since the civil war. The paper uses US dollars as a monetary unit.

[5] Numbers are taken from Numbeo, Property Prices in Beirut, Lebanon, updated September 2016, http://www.numbeo.com/property-investment/city_result.jsp?country=Lebanon&city=Beirut.

legitimize their existence. A good example of an effective van line, appreciated by youth, is van no. 4, which connects Hayy el-Sellom in south Beirut to Hamra in central Beirut.[6] Youth also resort to services (*jitneys*, or taxi-services, a taxi that operates along main routes and picks up several passengers) for moving inside the city itself, though their costs are higher than vans, as they pay licensing and registration fees. Mostly, young people move around using private cars and motorcycles, accessible to some through a relatively affordable second-hand car dealing service, as well as facilitated credit payments in private banks.

As for walkability, Beirut's agglomeration is less and less walkable. Municipal Beirut's neighbourhoods are much more accessible for pedestrians than the new hilly suburbs conceived to be navigated by vehicles. Even within municipal Beirut, walking is not a preferred mode of transportation as sidewalks and pedestrian crossings are not safe, not shaded and not smoothly connected into a walkable network (such as Ramlet el-Beida, Jnah). Moving in a vehicle is also strongly associated with a higher social status, while walking is associated with lower class practices (Monroe 2011). Some neighbourhoods in the city are more walkable than others, such as Ras Beirut where students, dwellers, expats and tourists flock the streets, and areas where the urban fabric is close-knit and street life is vibrant (Mar Mikhail, Gemmayezeh, Tariq al-Jdideh, Zokak al-Blatt, Mar Elias). The municipality of Beirut has commissioned an urban study for developing soft mobility patterns throughout Beirut (*Liaison Douce*), which has been completed, and has been awaiting the approval of the municipal council and governor for implementation, for several years now.

Physical access is not the sole factor affecting spatial mobility in the cities of Lebanon. Sectarian politics and moral norms are also factors that impact youth's choices for navigating the city, as we have shown in our study of moral leisure sites across Beirut and its southern section (Deeb and Harb 2013). Youth choose to go to places where they feel safe and comfortable, among their own, in terms of norms and values. Piety, gender and class, as well as life experiences and personal mood, all come together when they make their choice. Levels of sectarian political tension also factor into such decisions. People, especially youth, avoid going to territories affiliated with the "other" political group in times of heightened sectarian tension. However, the spatial features of the site itself can trump all these considerations: the public beach, the seaside corniche, the park or the river, all attract youth for their environmental qualities, their openness and their association with the comfort of being outdoors and in nature.

Thus, a variety of material and symbolic elements simultaneously facilitate and complicate youth's mobility in Lebanese cities and neighbourhoods. People negotiate their movement in the city, and their navigation of its spaces and places according to sectarian politics, social and religious norms and values, spatial features, as well as gender and class.

[6] I know of van number 4 through AUB students who use it to come to university, and who praise its drivers, their driving know-how through busy traffic, its safety and its affordability. Actually, van no. 4 has many fans, and its own Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/van4.lb?fref=ts%255C), liked by 10,500 people, where one can read users' anecdotes, jokes and comments. For a detailed account of its operations see Mohtar and Samaha (2016).

1.3 Access to Public Spaces

Lebanese cities have very few public spaces, in terms of parks and gardens. Public life often happens in the streets. The lively streets of the city are strongly patronized by the working class, incorporating a dominance of young males. Representations stigmatize these places, as groups who dwell in them are said to be prone to substance abuse, harassment and unruly behaviour. Urban policies in the post-war period have not privileged public spaces of encounter, and have instead invested in infrastructural equipment and building highways that have led to the consolidation of an urban lifestyle away from public street life. People live in their homes, outside of the city, commute back and forth to work, and spend their free time in secure private environments such as resorts, clubs, shopping centres and malls – a trend similar to many other cities in the South-East Mediterranean and beyond, dominated by neoliberal urban policies and privatization strategies.

Public parks and gardens have not been a priority of local urban policies. Only recently, in Beirut, did the municipality take up a private sector grant to refurbish one of its public gardens (Sanayeh) – although that one was already in decent shape, and the funds could have been used to rehabilitate other public gardens which were in much worse shape. The municipality also timidly endorsed an NGO project to establish public libraries across Lebanese cities (as-Sabil), but without granting them the needed human and financial resources its coffers hold. Additionally, the Beirut municipality did not prioritize the opening of the largest park in the capital city (Horch Beirut), for what seems to be sectarian political reasons concerning its proximity to the Shiite Dahiya. Only in 2015 did the governor agree to open the park, after the relentless lobbying of the NGO Nahnoo, which I discuss further below. The municipality also did not do anything to protect the coastal areas of Ramlet el-Beida and Dalieh al-Raoucheh, the last remaining freely accessed seaside open spaces of municipal Beirut, which are under threat of private real-estate development. The municipality is also earmarking its public lands for parking buildings – again prioritizing private vehicle users over those who use the public realm.

Young people in the cities thus have very few freely accessible open spaces they can go to, hang out in, socialize and interact within. Those who can afford it go to private clubs and resorts to play sports and hang out, and to expensive shopping malls to consume and spend their free time. Those who cannot, go to the few public spaces available: in Beirut, that would be the seaside corniche, the public beach and the few parks. Young men also patronize street corners, monitoring the neighbourhood, smoking argileh, playing cards and checking out the passers-by. Cafes and restaurants have become important destinations for youth who spend a lot of free time there, away from their parents' scrutiny, studying, hanging out, meeting, interacting, flirting, smoking argileh and playing backgammon or cards (Deeb and Harb 2013). Some shopping malls also attract young people, even those with lesser financial means, who come to use their large alleys to roam around, exhibit their bodies and gaze at each other.[7] They often do not consume goods inside the mall, leaving it for a nearby sandwich shop to purchase cheaper food and drink, and then returning to continue their procession.

[7] Some shopping malls such as City Centre, City Mall and Le Mall attract a more working-class clientele, a fact that is well known to higher-income youth who avoid these spaces and restrict their outings to more exclusive malls such as ABC.

In sum, young people in Lebanon are denied affordable housing and basic services, sustainable mobility patterns and access to public space. There is no public actor, at the central or local scale, championing any of these causes. This significantly limits youth's liveability prospects, and their opportunities for a secure life. Municipalities, and municipal federations, could play an active and effective role to change these prospects but very few are mobilizing to take up such a leading role. Among many possibilities, municipalities can champion community centres, within which youth groups can play a key role; they can also engage youth in municipal committees, and encourage them to participate in local affairs; and they can find opportunities via the private sector to encourage youth entrepreneurship and promote job opportunities for them.

In what follows, I focus on how, over the past decade, these unjust and skewed urban policies have led to social and political mobilization among youth groups in Beirut who are holding public authorities accountable for providing them with more a liveable city. These young activists are participating in protests, campaigns, NGOs and coalitions – leading up to the consolidation of an urban social movement.

2. THE MAKING OF AN URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENT

We move now to identifying how, in a polarized and contested city like Beirut where youth has been steadily excluded from its urban services and its public spaces, an urban social movement has been progressively forming over the last decade, crystallizing in a municipal campaign named "Beirut Madinati" (Beirut, My City), which garnered 32 percent of the total number of votes, in the May 2016 municipal election.

I identify four conditions that have led to the creation of this urban social movement since the end of the civil war: 1) the legacy of a first generation of urban activists and scholars, which laid the foundation of a critical urban discourse; 2) the establishment of new urban studies programmes in universities, which led to the formation of a second generation of urban activists; 3) the growth of a diverse set of coalitions and campaigns placing urban issues at the centre of their claims; and iv) the progressive domination of the logic of sectarian political allotment, and the associated breakdown of public action, which led to an (ongoing) acute garbage crisis in August 2015 that prompted the mobilization of independent activist groups in the capital city, leading up to the establishment of Beirut Madinati.

2.1 Two Generations of Urban Activists

During the civil war, in moments of relative peace, public agents elaborated reconstruction and development plans for Beirut's city centre (1977) and for Greater Beirut (*Region metropolitaine de Beyrouth*, 1986). Several of the urban planners who worked on those projects believed in a practice of urban planning which serves the collective good. Their plans did not materialize, but they remained involved in the city's affairs. After the end of the civil war in 1990, talks about the reconstruction of Beirut's city centre started intensifying. In 1991, under the auspices of multibillionaire businessman Rafic Hariri who would be voted prime minister a year later, the Parliament voted for a special law allowing the creation of a real-estate company in the city centre with exceptional competencies: Solidere. Solidere brought in urban planners who made extravagant planning proposals for the city centre which erased

most of its urban fabric and altered the scale of its squares and neighbourhoods, transforming the city centre into a new capital supposed to operate at a global level. We were far from the practice of urban planning that served a collective good. The practice was emblematic of a neoliberal approach to urbanism that swept the Arab region (and beyond), and that has been well analysed in the literature (Fawaz 2009, Bogaert 2012). Several urban planners and urban scholars mobilized against Solidere. They spoke in conferences, and wrote books or essays in newspapers, arguing against its neoliberal approach to rebuilding the city, calling on public agents to preserve the public interest through devising urban policies that protect the public realm, improve mobility and keep the city liveable and inclusive. They mobilized, grouped and protested, to no avail. What remains of their struggles is a sizable body of knowledge on critical urban practice,[8] which engaged many urban scholars at the time, and continues to inspire many students of urban planning and design. They kept working with public agencies and professional bodies, in a constant effort to improve the practice of urban planning so it leads to better urban spaces in cities. One of their noteworthy initiatives was their struggle to preserve the urban heritage of Beirut, which also did not yield any positive outcomes. Here again, one of their major contributions was how they influenced a younger generation of urban practitioners and scholars, who worked with them, listened to their talks and debates, and/or read their work.

In 1995, two years after my graduation as an architect from the American University of Beirut (AUB), the first graduate programme in Urbanism opened in Beirut, at the *Académie libanaise des beaux-arts* (ALBA). I was among the first batch of graduates with a masters in Urbanism in 1996. After my graduation, I enrolled in a PhD programme in Political Science in France, and got a research job at the ex-CERMOC (now IFPO) of Beirut, as part of its urban laboratory.[9] A few years later, in 1998, AUB opened its graduate programme in Urban Planning and Design, at the department of Architecture and Design. I started teaching there part-time, alongside my colleague Mona Fawaz who was finalizing her PhD in Urban Planning at MIT. We both finished our PhDs, and joined the programme as full-time faculty in the early 2000s. Simultaneously, the Lebanese University (LU) established a Master's programme in Urbanism. Along the way, other universities joined them: Notre Dame University, and Beirut Arab University. Most of these university programmes had a strong grounding in social sciences, teaching students urban and planning theory courses, in addition to professional and technical tools. A few of them (LU and ALBA) had agreements with French universities that allowed French professors to come and teach, bringing with them their scholarship, expertise and networks.

[8] This group of practitioners and scholars published four books with Dar al-Jadid: Assem Salam wrote on urban heritage and planning, Nabil Beyhum on the urban sociology of Beirut, Georges Corm on the economics of the city and Jad Tabet on its urbanism.

[9] IFPO's urban lab was led by an urban historian (Jean-Luc Arnaud) who taught urbanism at ALBA, and established a network of graduate and post-graduate students working on urban issues. He organized regular debates with established local and international urban scholars, and established a newsletter which helped train these scholars in writing and publication. He also supported several of these students by providing them with funding, or introducing them to funding opportunities. These were the times when the French research centres established abroad were still well-financed. The urban lab was then led by three other French scholars who also helped consolidate this transition, although, progressively, resources became much scarcer. The urban lab was then discontinued because of lack of funding.

The critical urban discourse that had emerged with the first generation of urban activists started consolidating across most Lebanese universities – public and private. Graduate and undergraduate students acquired a substantive understanding of topics such as informality, housing, service provision, public space, urban governance, etc., and a grounded approach to urban research, incorporating fieldwork, ethnography and mapping. Scholars and experts got invited to give lectures and workshops, and conferences got organized delving in-depth into specific issues. One of these conferences at AUB (City Debates) became a landmark yearly event, attracting international urban scholars. More and more students became interested in urban studies and planning, some pursuing a graduate career in Lebanon, other opting to enrol in graduate programmes abroad. A generation of young urbanists was forming. Many of them were interested in professional practice, and joined big consulting firms in Lebanon and the Arab world.[10] Others were interested in consulting, and/or teaching. Among the latter group especially, many young people were increasingly conscious of their roles as reflective practitioners, able to intervene on cities, improve modes of spatial production, in ways that would make urban spaces operate better, in resonance with ordinary people's daily needs, thus making such spaces more actively used, experienced and owned.

Lebanon is also a place where opportunities for urban activism abound. As mentioned earlier, in a context of heightened neoliberal urbanism, urban policies and interventions are elaborated to service the rich, at the expense of the public. In our classrooms, we often discuss situations and cases where this is clearly demonstrated, and expose our students to the range of possible alternative interventions, highlighting goals of social justice, inclusion, equity and sustainability. We invite and engage with established urban professionals who are trying to incorporate such alternative approaches in their work. We also encourage our students to intern or work in their offices. Whenever we are solicited to contribute to an urban project or consultancy, we do so according to those principles. As such, many members of this second generation of urbanists are trained in the principles of critical urban studies.

Lebanon is also a country where wars and crises regularly occur. In 2006, the Israeli war on Lebanon destroyed infrastructure and hundreds of dwellings in south Beirut, and across the south of Lebanon. At AUB, we formed a reconstruction unit, and recruited many graduates who volunteered with us to contribute to the reconstruction process. This engagement was the first instance when we were able to apply our urban principles on such a scale. We contributed to planning neighbourhoods, and we used participatory action research. Our initiatives are documented in a volume edited by one of our colleagues, Howayda Al-Harithy (2010). This experience was critical for the young students who were working with us, as it allowed them to build their own approach to urban interventions, thus becoming more autonomous. Several of them maintained a strong propensity for urban activism, while pursuing their careers. One of them, Rabih Shibli, went on to become a key actor in establishing AUB's Civic Centre for Engagement and Community Service (CCECS), which he now directs. Another, Ismail Sheikh Hassan, was instrumental in the community-based action research that

[10] The Lebanese-based town planning department at Dar al-Handasah (Shair and partners), one of the leading consulting firms in the world, is composed of AUB graduates in urban design, and led by one. Khatib and Alami, another leading regional consulting firm, also incorporates many AUB urban graduates. A few AUB graduates have joined ministries of planning, and consulting firms in GCC countries. For more on the education of planners in Lebanon, see Verdeil (2008).

led to the development of the reconstruction plan for the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, which the Lebanese Army razed to the ground in 2009. Two others, Abir Saksouk-Sasso and Nadine Bekdache, became active in many urban activism initiatives, separately and collectively. Saksouk-Sasso, in conjunction with other artists, established Dictaphone – a collective that produces performances related to public space in Lebanon. Bekdache leads the Coalition for the Right to Housing in Lebanon. Together, they established Public Works, a platform promoting urban research and mapping tools. They are also active members of the Dalieh coalition promoting the preservation of the Dalieh coastal site of Beirut.

All of these people, and the extended network of their colleagues, are the leading members making up the new generation of urban activists in Beirut today. They are in regular conversation with urban scholars and practitioners who taught them at university, and whom they consult and engage with at their meetings and events. They are also connected to other urban activists, some of whom were trained abroad and came back to Beirut to apply their knowledge to a city they are fond of, that they seek to improve and make their own. They are also related to other networks of activists trained in development and social work, who are also keen on advocating environmental and social development issues, such as Greenline and Nahnoo.

In addition, this generation is well aware of the urban social movements that are multiplying across the world, led by the same urge to reclaim cities and urban spaces, and to participate in their processes of spatial production. The Arab uprisings and Turkey's Gezi protests had significant spatial components to their mobilization that reverberated across cities of the world, including Beirut. The urban activists I am discussing here are, like many of their peers, media-savvy. Through social media, they know about other urban activists' mobilization issues and techniques. They follow them, learn from them, and, sometimes, exchange with them in conferences and events they attend together, in Beirut, Cairo, Tunis or Istanbul.

This new generation of urban activists progressively established itself into coalitions, campaigns and NGOs, becoming more visible and vocal. They developed new modes of action and intervention that have led to tangible and successful results, which I now turn to discuss.

2.2 The Consolidation of Urban Activism: Groups and Success Stories

Civil society groups in Lebanon are many, and are well-mobilized vis-à-vis a variety of public issues. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) contribute significantly to a variety of policy sectors, especially education, health and the environment. Until recently, urban issues were completely absent from the agenda of NGOs and activists. People are generally rather unaware of urbanism as a professional practice, and of debates related to urban issues. Housing, urban services, public space, public transportation, informal settlements, etc.: these are not commonly debated in the media, in cultural settings or in public audiences.[11] In the past decade, however, the placement of urban issues in the public sphere has increased, especially among youth groups and activists, angry at the ways authorities have been managing urban

[11] A lot of debates that incorporate a significant urban and spatial component do not address these dimensions: labour policy, real-estate development, industrial policy, tourism, heritage, rent laws, domestic works, youth unemployment, etc., are all issues that are deeply impacted by spatial dynamics, but that exclude the spatial from their understanding.

policies, and concerned about making their city a more liveable and inclusive place – as we discussed earlier.

Several social media accounts and blogs contribute to these debates.[12] On the ground, besides NGOs and collectives which we discuss further below, visual and graffiti artists also play a role in claiming the city, through images and text, politicizing public action – although they often present themselves as non-political.[13] Other interesting initiatives, less spatial in their scope, but intellectually relevant to the promotion of spatial practices and urban rights, include projects like Mansion, where activists have occupied a private house for collective use, in coordination with the owners (Whiting 2012), and Outpost, a magazine promoting a substantive understanding of the commons and collective action.[14] Some cafés and incubator spaces also play a role in providing spaces that bring together people who want to improve the city – such as T-Marbouta, Mezian and AltCity in the Hamra neighbourhood.

A small number of NGOs directly tackle urban issues.[15] Paint Up, an NGO known for their vividly coloured public staircases, and benches in the city,[16] declare the desire to "make Beirut brighter and more beautiful, through colour." Beirut Green Project, which voices "the right to have [green] spaces in our city,"[17] has started the "Green Your Lunch" initiative, where people take their lunch break in the city's existing parks. Masha3 – a short-lived initiative – sought to reclaim the city's public properties.[18] A cluster of people are working on public transportation and soft mobility initiatives, such as Lawen Ray7in, advocating a national campaign for public transportation,[19] and the Chain Effect, Cycling Circle and Cycle Hack, which are promoting cycling. The Dictaphone Group investigates and comments on urban spaces in Lebanon through live art interventions,[20] which seek to "to celebrate and 'use' public landscapes and to prioritize communal spaces within the context of political, social and spatial injustices in Lebanon" (Harb 2013). Dictaphone has worked on the aerial tramway in Jounieh (Bet Téléférique), on the Beirut coastline (The Sea Is Mine), and on the railways of Beirut. TandemWorks is developing a series of initiatives on Beirut River, promoting art interventions, in partnership with neighbouring communities.[21] Public Works is undertaking a campaign for preserving the right to housing in Beirut,[22] in the aftermath of rent law revisions that will progressively cancel subsidized rents, thus threatening affordable housing. A few initiatives are located outside Beirut, such as Lil Madina Initiative, which explores the city of Saida, and seeks to improve its liveability through urban planning and design tools.[23] Among this variety of small-scale initiatives, I will single out and examine three that have had

[12] See for instance Sandra Rishani Richani's blog *Beirut the Fantastic* (http://spatiallyjustenvironmentsbeirut.blogspot.it), which fantasizes "on Beirut's urban what ifs."
[13] Well-noted are the works of Ali Al-Rafei, Ashekman, PGCrew, Arofish and others. On the topic see Saleme (2013) and the documentary titled "Walls That Speak", in *Al-Jazeera World*, 3 April 2013, http://aje.me/XpF1lQ.
[14] See *The Outpost*'s website: http://www.the-outpost.com.
[15] The data for this section build on Harb (2013).
[16] Pictures of the initiatives undertaken by Paint Up can be seen on thewebsite: http://dihzahyners.tumblr.com.
[17] See Beirut Green Project's website: https://beirutgreenproject.wordpress.com/about.
[18] See Masha3's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/masha3.org.
[19] See Lawen Ray7in's website: http://www.lawenray7in.com.
[20] See Dictaphone Group's website: http://www.dictaphonegroup.com.
[21] See TandemWorks' website: http://www.tandemworks.org.
[22] See Public Works' website: http://publicworksstudio.com/index_en.html.
[23] See Lil Madina Initiative's website (in Arabic): https://lilmadinainitiative.wordpress.com.

successful impacts on urban policy: one NGO (Nahnoo) and two coalitions (The Campaign for the Preservation of Dalieh, and Against the Fouad Boutros Highway).[24]

The first success story is the campaign that the Nahnoo NGO managed for the re-opening of Beirut's largest park, Horch Beirut – which finally opened its doors to the public in September 2015, after years of relentless efforts on the part of Nahnoo. Nahnoo is an NGO actively involved in empowering youth, and promoting their participation in public issues. One of its key goals is the promotion of public life through public parks, as they believe public spaces provide "a new platform for behavioural change" and promote citizenship. Their target space is Horch Beirut – the Pine Forest of Beirut, a city-scale public space that was burned down by Israeli airfare during the civil war, and lost all its trees. After the end of the civil war, the Lebanese government received a grant from the French and Italian governments to re-plant the park. The area was closed off for years to allow the trees to grow. However, more than twenty-five years later, and even though the trees are now well grown, the park remains sealed off from public access. The municipality of Beirut, which oversees the park, provides a range of justifications for closing the park: the potential threat of sectarian explosion, moral disorder, people's lack of civility, the lack of financial and human resources to monitor the park's use, etc. Nahnoo adopted a negotiation policy with the municipality, and worked closely with its councillors, attempting to influence its decision. After several years of lobbying, they changed their strategy and became more aggressive in their campaign, using media and social media tools to denounce the closing of the park, organizing protests to request its opening, and building a legal case against the municipal decision to close it down. At a point in time, a new governor was appointed for Beirut, who was more sympathetic to the cause of opening the park. Nahnoo capitalized on that sympathy and convinced the governor (who has executive power for the city of Beirut) to open the park one day a week as a pilot test, during which Nahnoo will mobilize dozens of volunteers who will patrol the park, insuring order and cleanliness. Since September 2015, the park has been open on Sundays, and patronized by a large variety of users, without any record of incident. As of June 2016, the park has been open on a daily basis.

The second success story is the campaign led by the Dalieh Civil Coalition for the preservation of a large coastal area of Beirut,[25] threatened by private real-estate development. The campaign achieved the listing of Dalieh with the 2015 World Monument Fund, which is hoped to significantly delay the project. The Dalieh of Beirut is a beautiful rocky, hilly formation that extends over a large landscape along the Mediterranean sea. It includes a particular rock, named the Pigeon Rock, which is emblematic of Beirut's seascape, and featured on one of its national bills. The Dalieh was always a public area, patronized by hundreds of Beirutis during their free time. It is also used by fishermen, divers and swimmers. The Kurd community of Beirut celebrates its Nowrouz events there. It is indeed the site of a diversity of social and spatial practices, and forms the collective memory of large groups of Beirutis (Saksouk-Sasso 2015). The Dalieh lands were converted from shared property (*masha'*) to private property in the 1960s. The owners never tried to build, as the construction law for such seafront plots does not provide sufficient real-estate values. In the 1990s, Rafic Hariri bought these plots from

[24] Both Nahnoo and Dalieh benefited from the legal advice of Legal Agenda, an activist legal NGO that seeks to empower civil society through legal tools. See Legal Agenda's website: http://english.legal-agenda.com.
[25] See the website of the Civil Campaign to Protect Dalieh: http://dalieh.org.

all owners, expanding the property size he could eventually build on. His death in 2005 put a halt to the plan. However, his heirs, who are short of cash as it would appear, have resumed interest in developing the Dalieh hill for touristic consumption. The Dalieh Coalition mobilized against this project. They started documenting the site's multiple assets, putting together a team of architects, urban designers, urban planners, landscape designers, urban historians, ecologists, archaeologists, water experts, etc., who contributed to authoring a report on Dalieh's rich natural resources, available on the coalition's website. They also built a legal file on the history of property changes, identifying loopholes through which one could intervene to contest its privatization. This legal research also revealed how attempts to change the construction law, exclusively on the lots acquired by Hariri so as to accommodate improved building opportunities, were also being made. The coalition organized an international ideas competition, which drew dozens of responses from which five were selected as winning entries,[26] providing viable ecological visions for preserving Dalieh. The entries were then exhibited to the public and used to raise further awareness about Dalieh as a threatened site, but also as a site of opportunities, which would preserve both the site's socio-cultural value and its ecological value. The competition brief and the winning entries are all accessible for viewing on the campaign's website. They also wrote an open letter to Mr. Rem Koolhas, who was hired to provide advice on building in Dalieh, which was widely circulated electronically.[27] Moreover, the campaign members argued for the placement of Dalieh on the 2015 World Monument Fund endangered list, which gives it a symbolic international weight that comes in very handy in negotiating for its preservation. Campaign members also met with people close to Dalieh's owners, and warned them of the disastrous ecological and socio-cultural consequences of building on this land. These multiple actions contributed to shedding light on the important value of Dalieh for the city, and dissuaded its owners from moving ahead with their construction plans, at least for a while.

The third success story is the Stop the Highway, Build the Fouad Boutros Park civil coalition, which fought against the implementation of a highway (conceived in the 1960s) in the dense neighbourhood of Achrafieh that was to cut across a heritage area, and disrupt its urban and social fabric. The coalition imposed on the municipality to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment study,[28] which had a negative conclusion and ultimately halted the project. If built, the Fouad Boutros Highway would cut across the historical neighbourhood of Mar Mikhail. Sitting on a hill, the neighbourhood includes charming staircases, gardens and early twentieth-century houses of particular architectural character. The highway project was conceived in the 1960s, during the era when private cars and infrastructural policies dictated the elaboration of urban plans, and was believed to be the best solution for traffic problems. Members of the municipality of Beirut dug out the project and reclaimed it, arguing it would solve the major traffic problem blocking Achrafieh – a neighbourhood in the eastern section of the city. They wanted to give it the name of Fouad Boutros, a renowned politician, as a testimony to his great contributions. They had received funds which they needed to spend,

[26] Civil Campaign to Preserve the Dalieh of Beirut, "Dalieh's Civil Campaign's Open Competition: Three Winning Entries", in *Jadaliyya*, 12 November 2015, http://interviews.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23169.
[27] Civil Campaign to Preserve the Dalieh of Beirut, "Open Letter to Mr. Rem Koolhaas", in *Jadaliyya*, 15 December 2014, http://www.arabic.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20264. Mr. Koolhas responded to the letter in the comments section, with a vague reply saying that his firm has not been hired yet to undertake the study.
[28] See the civil coalition's website: https://stopthehighway.wordpress.com/the-hekmeh-turk-fouad-boutros-project.

and the municipal council opted to use them on this project, for reasons that were not made public. When a group of architects and urban designers who were very familiar with this neighbourhood learned of the municipal council's plans, they mobilized against the project, and started a research process. They found out that the plots in question had been already expropriated for the highway passage, and were categorized as public municipal property. Documenting the site, they found that the damage done by the highway would extend beyond Mar Mikhael, threatening the social and economic life of other neighbourhoods, which would be cut off from each other. They also identified interesting opportunities to use the public lands already expropriated as open spaces, which could serve as a hilly park for the whole area of East Achrafieh. Importantly, they asked transportation planners to undertake a traffic study to confirm whether the highway would really solve the traffic issues of Achrafieh, as the municipality was claiming it would. The study revealed the traffic improvement will be minimal, and that traffic management solutions would yield better outcomes. The activists decided to provide an alternative solution to the highway: they worked on an urban design alternative – the Fouad Boutros Park, which they drew and rendered. They established a website with the name of their coalition and launched a petition against the highway, and for the park. They gathered thousands of signatures. Backed by the Ministry of Environment, they lobbied the municipality, using the environment law, requesting that it conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study for the project. The municipality reluctantly agreed, and the EIA was launched. The company in charge of it initiated a lengthy consultation and study process, which included many of the activists. Ultimately, the EIA results revealed a negative assessment for the impact of the highway project on Achrafieh. The municipality of Beirut shelved the project.

These success stories helped build strong ties among urban activists. They also provided them with a steep learning curve, and accumulated know-how. It is worth noting that this second generation of activists used novel modes of action in its operations. It privileged research and action-research, collected ethnographic data, used historical methods, reached out to acquire legal knowledge, did mapping and visual surveys, organized workshops and debates, networked with experts and produced documentation, reports and alternative visions. It also used lobbying, negotiation, media and social media, protests, legal tools, as well as performances, installations and competitions. It was organized in loose ways; even at the NGO level, participants relied on informal modes of coordination and communication, outside rigid and hierarchical forms of power and management, privileging instead horizontal means of exchange, and prioritizing inclusion and participation in the process of decision-making and implementation.

In sum, Beirut had become a key site for the production of urban activists, organized in a diversity of groups, drawing on a range of resources, and proximity between leaders, furthering rich, productive and innovative relations between these activists. Let us turn now to witnessing how this increased production of activists led to the crystallization of an urban social movement.

2.3 Emergence of Al-Hirak and Beirut Madinati

In July 2015, the contract providing the Sukleen company with a monopoly on waste disposal in Beirut and Mount Lebanon came to an end, after two decades of service.[29] The (opaque) story goes that a contractor close to the Hariri family leads Sukleen, which manages waste at the high cost of 150 dollar/ton, twice as much as in other countries. The (same opaque) story also goes that the Hariri family had settled an agreement with Walid Jumblatt, warlord and leader of the Druze community in Lebanon, to dispose of the garbage in the Chouf mountains – a territory under his control. Irrespective of its actual facts, the garbage disposal story is clearly one of those many stories in Lebanon where revenues of public services are allotted to sectarian political leaders (Leenders 2012), to advance their private interests, at the expense of the public good, and here, also at the expense of the health of all Greater Beirut's dwellers. It is not clear why the contract with Sukleen was terminated rather than renewed as usual. It is probably related to the fact that people in Chouf no longer accepted being the recipients of the waste of Greater Beirut, having for more than fifteen years suffered the huge health costs, and mobilized against it vehemently, sending a clear sign to Jumblatt that he could no longer count on their acquiescence. No other sectarian leader in government dared volunteer to provide a waste dump in the territory under his jurisdiction, leaving the issue of where to dispose of waste an open problem. Thus, in July 2015, mounds of garbage started accumulating in the streets of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, resulting in a major health hazard.

Activists started mobilizing against the inability of the government to act and its poor solutions, taking to the streets in downtown Beirut, and protesting against the Ministry of Environment, located in the city centre. The groups of protestors increased and became more and more visible and vocal, on social media, but also in urban space. They started organizing into several small coalitions: *Tol3et Re7etkom* (You Stink), *Badna Nhaseb* (We Want Accountability), *ila al-Share3* (On the Streets), *Akhbar al-Saha* (Square News), etc. They requested the resignation of the Minister of Environment, as well as the drafting of an ecological waste management plan to be led by municipalities rather than Sukleen. They also asked for the holding of parliamentary elections according to a new electoral law, refusing the authority of the parliamentarians who had extended their own mandate few months earlier. They thus made issue-based demands focused on the right to efficient public services, to democratic elections and to accountability.

On 29 August 2015, they rallied in downtown Beirut in a protest that gathered about one hundred thousand participants. It was the first time in the history of post-war Beirut that such numbers of protestors had taken to the streets to make an issue-based claim, transcending sectarian lines. Quickly afterwards however, the coalition that led the protest – which became known as al-Hirak (The Movement) – started disagreeing on methods of action, and splintering into subgroups. The government organized its own repressive action, and violently attacked protestors who were attempting to take over closed-off squares in downtown Beirut. The police also made several arrests among their ranks. The government used classic methods of divide-and-conquer, co-optation and challenging the ethics of some leaders of al-Hirak. People got scared, started critiquing the Hirak, and the protests decreased in size. Ultimately, they phased out as the government made interim arrangements with Sukleen, which removed

[29] Solid background materials on the garbage crisis are authored by Abu-Rish (2015) and Boutros (2015).

the garbage from the streets and disposed of it along the empty Beirut riverbanks, while awaiting the identification of permanent garbage dumps. At the time of writing this paper, the government has agreed on re-opening the Chouf dump, as well as an old dump on the coast of Beirut, and initiated a new dump also on the coast. Garbage is being moved from the riverbanks to these new temporary sites, which will be filled soon, postponing another eruption of the garbage crisis by a few months.

The garbage crisis revealed the existence of a multitude of independent groups of activists fed up with the sectarian political system ruling Lebanon, and destroying its public services. Among them were our urban activists who, strengthened by the rise of this political consciousness, decided in November 2015 to organize a campaign in view of the municipal elections of May 2016, and run for election in the Beirut municipality. It was a crazy idea, which was half-dismissed by some, but passionately advocated by others. People thought: "We can do this. We are fed up being governed by those rulers who depend on sectarian political leaders' agendas. We want to use our knowledge and expertise to improve this city. Why not us? If not us, who else?" Founding members starting calling their friends, and friends called their friends, and the group expanded. The thrill of this possible utopia started growing, and became infectious. If anyone had doubts, these dissipated when they experienced the vibe that was animating the meetings. The more hesitant ones joined later, but they joined, with vigour, and brought in more people. In February 2016, the group had about one hundred members working on developing its bylaws and code of ethics[30] as well as a municipal programme, elaborating its media and communication strategy, coming up with a fundraising strategy, recruiting volunteers, and identifying candidates. It called itself Beirut Madinati (Beirut, My City). An NGO was created for the practical reasons of opening a bank account, but the modes of action were horizontal and participatory. A steering committee of twelve team leaders was appointed, led by a coordinator, and reported to a general assembly of sixty people. Each team leader worked independently and reported back to the steering committee regularly. More task teams were formed along the way: a neighbourhood outreach team, a legal team, a political strategy team and an election-day team.

The constituency of Beirut Madinati increased especially after the publication of its programme[31] on its website, the opening of its Facebook page, the holding of fundraising events, and strategic meetings with social and political influencers. It expanded further, and the crowdfunding campaign that was launched picked up exponentially after the announcement of the names of its twenty-four candidates. The municipal council of Beirut is led by twenty-four members who, unlike in parliamentary elections, are not bound to be distributed according to sectarian affiliation. However, the practice goes that Beirut's municipality is equally divided between Christians and Muslims, and according to a sectarian distribution of Shia, Druze, Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant and Armenian seats. Beirut Madinati's position was not to disrupt this practice. However, it made its selection of candidates based on a diversity of other criteria, such as gender, occupation, socio-economic background and age. Its list included for the first time in the history of Lebanese elections 50 percent women candidates.[32] It also opted for a closed list, sending a clear message that it did not want to bargain with other

[30] Beirut Madinati, *Our Code of Ethics & Conduct*, http://beirutmadinati.com/code-of-ethics/?lang=en.
[31] Beirut Madinati, *The Program*, http://beirutmadinati.com/program/?lang=en.
[32] Beirut Madinati, *Our Candidates*, http://beirutmadinati.com/candidates/?lang=en.

candidates for votes. This choice had positive reverberations among Beiruti voters, especially those who had given up on local politics, and who started identifying with the alternative, independent, programmatic-based politics that Beirut Madinati was proposing. Several prominent journalists also wrote supportive op-eds in leading newspapers. The candidate list was also the antithesis of the list formed by the regime and led by Hariri's man Jamal Itani, director of Solidere. This "Beirutis List" (Byerte List) grouped all representatives of sectarian political parties – who, typically, forgot they were yesterday's enemies. In the face of this sectarian political establishment, Beirut Madinati made its claim:

> We refuse your interference in municipal development, municipal work should not be paralyzed by your sectarian political agendas and interests, we want the municipality to be governed by a harmonious team of independent experts who will implement a programme that will improve the liveability of the capital, and who are not dependent on sectarian political allegiances.

The claim echoed strongly with many, as demonstrated by the hundreds of positive comments received on Facebook and Twitter, and the 200,000 dollars gathered in the crowdfunding campaign.[33] People were thirsty for this alternative.

Now, Beirut's registered voters number 470,000 (while city-dwellers amount to 1 million), and typically participation rates in municipal elections do not extend beyond 25 or 30 percent, even prior to the civil war. Based on anecdotal evidence, about 20 percent of those registered have emigrated, while about 50 percent have left the city and live in its peripheries, and do not have a strong sense of belonging to the capital. In the 2016 elections, 20 percent voted. The Byerte List won with 43 percent of the votes while Beirut Madinati scored 32 percent. It was a score that exceeded the campaign's expectations. If we were in a system of proportional representation, ten of Beirut Madinati's candidates would be sitting on the municipal council today. As an analyst wrote, Beirut Madinati lost the election, but was victorious. Today, Beirut Madinati is continuing its journey, and its leadership is taking the time to explore its next steps. While it is too soon to speculate on the future, it is worth celebrating the consolidation of these groups of activists, urbanists and others, into an urban social movement.

CONCLUSION

I discussed in this paper how, in reaction to exclusive urban policies, young activists in Beirut mobilized gradually into an urban social movement concerned with recovering the liveability of their city and their shared spaces. Indeed, the experiences of Fouad Boutros Highway, Dalieh, Horch Beirut, Al-Hirak, and many other examples I am not discussing here provided what Nicholls (2009:84) analysed as "the strategic values of place," namely: repeated encounters and more opportunities for diverse coalitions and activists to connect to one another, forging trust and strong ties, and ensuring the stability needed to consolidate connections into a more tightly clustered and relational unit. As the literature shows, "stronger ties generate forms of social capital that enable diverse actors to mobilise and coordinate their resources

[33] See the video (in Arabic): *Crowdfunding for Beirut Madinati*, 19 April 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YBvJGL75E8.

in contentious political enterprises," as it allows activists to "draw on norms, trust, frames and solidarities to quickly re-group and fight" (Nicholls 2009:84). This more "tightly clustered relational unit" and this "contentious political enterprise" is, in our case, Beirut Madinati.

How will this urban social movement sustain its growth, amidst a highly contentious sectarian political environment, which will surely fight its consolidation (using classic tactics of co-optation, discourse adoption, defamation, media closing, physical violence and harassment[34])? How will it avoid being fragmented or disrupted by internal cleavages and antagonisms that are bound to emerge over time? These are the key challenges that Beirut Madinati has to deal with in the months to come, alongside a huge political capital it got entrusted with via the 32,000 votes its list managed to win, against all odds, and with relatively limited means and resources. In other words, Beirut bred a successful urban social movement, but will it be able to raise it to maturity?

[34] These tactics have been identified in an unpublished study done by Beyond Reform and Development, and kindly shared by its lead researcher Gilbert Doumit. See also Salloukh et al. (2015).

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