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REMEMBERING THE OLD GOOD DAYS  
THE RECONSTRUCTION OF URBAN SPACE IN POSTWAR BEIRUT

By

ASEEL SAWALHA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in  
Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor in Philosophy, The City University of  
New York.

2002

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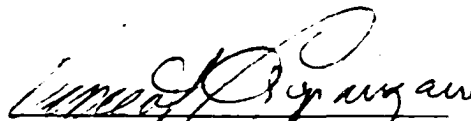
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**Abstract**REMEMBERING THE OLD GOOD DAYS  
THE RECONSTRUCTION OF URBAN SPACE IN POSTWAR BEIRUT

By

ASEEL SAWALHA

Advisor: Professor Vincent Crapanzano

This work is an ethnography of place and memory in post war Beirut. It examines the rebuilding project of downtown Beirut in terms of the competing discourses surrounding and driving the process.

After the end of a long civil war, Beirut is rebuilding its decimated downtown, once a vibrant, heterogeneous regional center. The official reconstruction --executed by the private real estate company, Solidere --provoked multiple conflicts involving 18 ethno-religious groups, as well as intellectuals, planners, architects and historians over conserving historically valuable spaces and the definition of the city's past(s) and future. This ethnography examined the use of, and narratives of city space before, during, and after the war. Through close

study of multiple urban sites and groups, I examined the competing discourses about place, history and identity, asking how participants use the past (pre-war and wartime) to claim future urban space.

Drawing on 18 months of fieldwork in Beirut between 1996-1997, this study explores the ways in which various readings of the past informed and shaped debates over identity, culture, and history in the context of urban reconstruction and recovery in postwar Beirut. It presents ethnographic and textual accounts of multiple locales: the urban reconstruction project centered in downtown Beirut, a multi-ethnic-religious neighborhood adjacent to the project area, and public sites of nostalgia throughout the city as remembered and narrated by different individuals and groups.

Applying and questioning theories of post-modernity, globalization, urban studies, and anthropological approaches to narrative and oral history, I presented concrete examples of how urban reconstruction projects and the discourses they produced participated in the formation of urban culture and the production of knowledge about space and time.

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## **Introduction**

This ethnography examines the social understanding of place and time in postwar Beirut. Specifically it addresses the ways people use its past to contest for urban space. I explore the ways residents of the city remember or forget specific urban space as they experienced it before and during the war. These different spatial accounts, which I treat as discourses, shed light on the ways the city's histories and pasts are constructed and contested in this crucial moment in the city's history.

My fieldwork took place a few years after the end of a sixteen-year civil war (1975-1991), when the city was in the process of restoring government authority and rebuilding the destroyed physical structure. The war had disrupted every dimension of city life. It reduced the city that used to be considered the region's pride - "the Paris of the Arab World" and the "East's Window on the West" - into an international metaphor for ruin, destruction and

disaster. The civil war, much of which was fought within the city of Beirut, drastically transformed the physical structure of the city and the social and economic relations among its inhabitants. Multi-storey buildings were flattened, markets and residential areas were bombed, and the prewar economy and political structures were severely crippled. This physical destruction was accompanied by major demographic changes in the city, as thousands were killed or injured and half of the population was temporarily uprooted and displaced from their original homes. Beirut's Central District was among the areas most affected by the war, it turned into a "ghost town," "the battle area" and ultimately the "green line" that divided the city into two: east and west, Muslim and Christian.

During the war, the government was, in effect, absent. What is ordinarily managed and directed by municipal forces were run instead by competing factions of militia, informal military groups organized mainly along sectarian lines. Militias and political parties took over, intervening in conflict resolution and providing services and security for the areas under each group's control. Many of the wealthier residents fled the country, leaving their property in the

care of others. Apartments were leased, bought, or squatted. Those who stayed had to develop "survival strategies," procedures and channels for obtaining basic services and safety. The people of Beirut lived in a situation of constant emergency, which became part of the routine of their daily lives, changed their political alliances, socio-economic networks and finally transformed people's relations towards urban space. Nothing was intended as a long-term measure, yet many of these systems persisted throughout the war, and were still operating in the mid-1990s while I was in the city.

The signing of the Ta'ef Accord in 1991 eventually marked the end of the war emergencies and the beginning of the postwar era. The constitution was revised and a new government was formed. In order to establish legitimacy after the chaos of a long war, Beirut's postwar government focused on restoring its institutions and reclaiming its roles in placing order in the city. The new government, besides the functions of day to day operations, has to resolve a host of byproducts of the war, such as placing the thousands of displaced, incorporating the war militias into postwar communities, reconciling opposing sectarian

and political groups, and forging one unified history among the eighteen recognized ethno-religious groups. The Municipality's priority is given to rebuilding Beirut's Central District, an issue that touches on the other issues: in order to rebuild the area, the city must remove the displaced who are currently living there, it must define who's past deserves to be recognized, and it must establish mechanisms to replace the wartime militia channels.

The study asks how reconstruction affects residents' lives, how it shapes their relationship to space, and how their relationship to space affects their position within the city. The considerations about space and place inevitably involve questions about time and history. This urban ethnography documents the spatial experiences of various local groups within this era of transition and uncertainty.

Recognizing that the different readings of the past inform the present discourse and debates over the future of Beirut, I document the ways certain places and sites are read, used, and especially how they are remembered. I consider this an ethnography of memory and space. In

exploring the ways urban spaces are remembered to contest space, this work inevitably raises questions of power. While the groups with power (from government, investors or residual militia) shape the future plans and spaces in the city through erecting new building, demolishing some and conserving others, the less-powerful use remembering/forgetting and memory/amnesia as strategies to negotiate for what they need from the city and the influential actor and agencies.

In this ethnography, I call the postwar era of reconstruction a "postwar emergency": the sense among the residents of the Beirut that they live in a state of transition and uncertainty. People I interviewed often spoke about a sense of emergency during the war years; I am extending this quality to describe the present phase. Each chapter presents detailed examples of moments of emergency, and relates them to issues of space and remembrance--as the meanings of space and time are connected throughout.

Chapter One lays the ground for the study by describing the dramatic changes in the physical appearance of Beirut. Specifically, it highlights the changes in the neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown area as a result of

the reconstruction project of Beirut's Central District. From the physical description, I move on to consider how Beirutis view their own city, and how social science literature views Beirut and the related topics of the dissertation.

In order to frame accounts of the city as narrative, chapter one traces several narratives of destruction and reconstruction of Beirut's ancient history from Phoenician times until the civil war. In these portrayals of the past, the narrators agree that Beirut was destroyed several times, but it is a city that "will never die." Shifting to another view, to understand how current social science theory approaches postwar Beirut, I review selective theoretical and ethnographic writings on the politics and meaning of urban space, and urban development and reconstruction across anthropology, geography, cultural studies and Middle East Studies.

The chapter questions traditional anthropological methodologies of studying "simple" communities, and presents the challenge of conducting anthropological research in an unstable urban setting in transition such as Beirut. The chapter raises questions regarding doing

research in a single neighborhood, a specific ethnic group or studying the city as a whole.

From the broad views of Beirut, both local and academic, the study moves closer in Chapter two, focusing on the core of the city's change. Chapter two opens with a tour of Beirut's Central District organized by Solidere, the private real-estate company in charge of rebuilding the downtown area. Solidere (together with regional and international investors) is carrying out the largest urban reconstruction project in the 1990s worldwide. The project is criticized by intellectuals, historians, social scientists and urban planners who are engaged in heated debate about the future of Beirut who voice their opposition to the project through producing what I call "hegemonic texts." Chapter Two documents a number of "hegemonic texts" that emerged in response to the reconstruction project, raising along the way questions about the related issues of heritage, authenticity, and memory.

While much of these debates unfold at the level of text in the official arena, the reconstruction project has deep repercussions on ordinary residents. Chapter Three

shifts the focus from the reconstruction project itself to examine its effects on the daily lives of Beirut. It presents the difficulties faced by residents who are not able to voice their criticism to the reconstruction project through "hegemonic texts." Spatially specific, the chapter documents the changes in a single neighborhood which is adjacent to the downtown area: Ayn al-Mreisi. I describe the physical changes in Ayn al-Mreisi neighborhood that resulted from the competition over territory and the conflict in the interests of entrepreneurs and the needs of local residents: demolishing of old buildings, erecting new ones as well as evicting prewar and wartime tenants from their homes. Chapter Three records a transitional moment in the lives of the residents of Ayn al-Mreisi, when, in reaction to the effects of reconstruction, family members are discussing long range plans regarding housing, old businesses are either closing or expanding, and the very identity of the neighborhood - its map as well as its history -- are being reconsidered.

Staying in the same neighborhood, the study moves on from Chapter Three's consideration of the postwar dramatic changes in the lives of the local residents, Chapter Four

views another form of reaction to reconstruction. It documents the attempts of Ayn al-Mreisi inhabitants to challenge their exclusion from the postwar plans of reconstruction, in particular, the strategy of forming "interest groups" in order to gain urban rights, spaces and services. These interests groups arose after the war, their members did not necessarily cooperate before or during the war. Sectarian or confessional affiliations that were essential during the war are replaced by these temporary or long-term alliances, organized not around religion but around interest.

In order to legitimize their demands, members of interest groups present new reading of history and the past. They often use prewar and wartime memories and experiences to claim and negotiate for urban rights. The chapter presents case studies of two groups: the fishermen, and the Association for Protecting the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi.

Interest groups use memory to recapture spaces; they still enjoy a possibility of claiming the same space they used to use. For the group discussed in Chapter Five, in contrast, the spaces in question are gone. Intellectuals

are not competing for space in the present tense. They express longing and nostalgia, but not plans, for their old cafes that were either destroyed by the war or replaced by McDonalds and other development substitutions. Unlike the temporary interest groups, this group existed before the war (although they might not consider themselves a group).

Up to this point, the chapters examined populations that are struggling for their position in the city, but that nonetheless have some enfranchisement or power. There is another group that is even more marginal than the intellectuals without cafes, the fishermen losing their port, or the residents without leases. Chapter Six discusses the daily lives of this most marginal group in Beirut, who are excluded from all the future plans of the city: the war displaced population. Exploring the complexity of the issue of displacement, Chapter Six presents discourses from a spectrum of speakers the displaced themselves, landlords whose properties is occupied by the displaced, political parties and organizations who work with the displaced, and the governmental agencies that were created to facilitate solving this major issue. Although there is not unanimous

agreement about how to define them, there is some consensus about seeing them as unwanted reminders of the war, and what should be done about them (they should return to their places of origin). The disagreement on the definition and the size of the population, however, has created an overlap in the responsibilities, which, added into the context of general postwar uncertainty has caused a confusion for the displaced on how to negotiate for alternative homes. The chapter illustrates this ambiguity through a few narratives of displaced families, highlighting their uncertainty and relative powerlessness about their futures.

In this study, each chapter explores issues of time and space and situates those issues within the context of contemporary theoretical and methodological debates in anthropology, urban studies memory, which I elaborate in the conclusion. Relating space to time and place to history, this ethnography records a transitional moment in the city's history, a moment in which the city is physically being rebuilt while the identities of its residents are being negotiated. These negotiations are entwined with the politics of the present and aspiration of a better future, and involve a matrix of groups, the

members of which are drawn from all sectors and sects in  
Beirut.

## Chapter One

### Beirut: A History of Construction and Destruction

#### Disappearing Neighborhoods

For my first trip to Beirut in the summer of 1995, I chose *Zqaq el-Blat* as a fieldsite to conduct my research for a doctoral dissertation<sup>1</sup>. *Zqaq el-Blat* was ideal for several reasons. It was one of the oldest and liveliest neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown area, crowded with small shops and residential buildings, children in the

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<sup>1</sup> I went to Beirut for the first time in the summer of 1995 to conduct a preliminary research on the rebuilding of postwar Beirut. I returned to Beirut in 1996 and continued the research project for thirteen months. The time spent between 1995-1997 was eighteen months.

streets, old men in front of shops, and women on balconies overlooking narrow streets and alleys. When I returned to New York to write my proposal about the ways daily life in *Zqaq Al-Blat* was shaped by the project of rebuilding downtown Beirut, I assumed I had found the ideal neighborhood for my fieldwork. On my second visit to Beirut six months later, however, the proposed research site looked like a Hollywood movie set. The residents had been evacuated, many of the buildings were demolished, a few empty structures were designated as landmarks to be renovated, and a highway under construction split the neighborhood into two. Now a large part of the *Zqaq el-Blat* neighborhood became part of Solidere's reconstruction project. The noise of construction equipment replaced the once vibrant and vital life of the neighborhood's residents. As a result of this dramatic change in the physical appearance of the neighborhood and since most of the areas' residents and space users were evicted from their homes and businesses, the *Zqaq alBlat* was

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- Solidere is the real estate company in control of rebuilding the downtown area. Solidere's role and politics will be discussed in chapter two.

disqualified from being a valid anthropological "fieldsite."

Similar to *Zqaq al-Blat* neighborhood, downtown area where thousands of displaced families had occupied residential and commercial buildings during the war was also "empty." Solidere paid the displaced cash compensation for leaving buildings they were occupying and demolished most of the remaining buildings in the downtown area. Archaeologists worked side by side with construction workers, bulldozers and demolition equipment. Amongst the rubble of destroyed buildings stood one renovated building that housed the offices of the reconstruction company Solidere.

Within this context of instability, I had to choose an alternative fieldsite. One which, is close to the downtown area so that I could study the effects of urban renewal on the daily lives of its residents and hoped it would not disappear due to reconstruction in a year. After visiting various neighborhoods and consulting with friends and other researchers in the city, I decided to work in the *Ayn al-Mreisi* neighborhood, facing the Mediterranean. It was just west of the downtown area. As one of the oldest

neighborhoods of Beirut, its inhabitants belonged to various sectarian groups and classes who settled in the area at various times, before and during the war. Similar to other neighborhoods, Ayn al-Mreisi was undergoing constant and major changes. Investors were negotiating with property owners to buy old houses and buildings to start new international and regional businesses. Prewar and wartime residents and tenants discussed whether to sell their properties for high prices to investors and outsiders or to hold on their property and preserve their neighborhood. The displaced families were negotiating for compensation and looking for alternative housing options.

Initially, I thought Ayn al-Mreisi neighborhood is an ideal research site, but at this time the challenge was of conducting research in a single urban neighborhood. Ayn al-Mreisi inhabitants were not confined to their neighborhood in their daily lives, rather they were connected through a set of social, economic and political networks with other groups, individuals, institutions both within the city, the country, and internationally.

In Ayn al-Mreisi, I interviewed diverse groups of people and individuals, the war displaced population, the

fishermen, property owners and tenants, investors and developers, intellectuals, women's groups, family associations, war militia members, and religious and political leaders. This put me in touch with local, governmental, and nongovernmental institutions as well as regional and international organizations located within and outside the neighborhood. I traced the social networks of Ayn al-Mreisi residents with those of other neighborhoods and the rest of the country. I worked closely with political groups and parties whose activities covered the whole city. This included citywide governmental organizations and institutions: The Lebanese Ministry of the Displaced, The Central Fund for the Displaced, CDR The Council for Development and Reconstruction, Beirut Municipality and Ministry of Tourism; political parties and personalities: Amal Movement, Hizbaliyah and parliament candidates and representatives; nongovernmental organizations: Beirut the Heritage, The Association for the Rights of Property Owners, Association for Protecting the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi, UNDP (United Nations Development Program); and local regional and international investors and developers: architectural firms and Solider.

Interacting with the above organizations, groups and individuals took the research beyond the borders of one single neighborhood.

In postwar Beirut it was impossible to locate a single "isolated" community within a confined space, or to draw clear physical boundaries around a specific neighborhood, or to locate one group within a single locale. In the changing urban context of postwar Beirut, the same individual may be a member of more than one community, sectarian, ideological, professional and political group. Since most Beirutis lived in a transitional stage both spatially and in terms of identity, many individuals claimed spaces in more than one neighborhood and affiliated themselves with a number of sectarian and confessional groups. In view of that, my research was not limited to a single neighborhood, ethnic or religious group, socio-economic class, or a single moment in time. Rather, I incorporated data about a number of neighborhoods --such as the Southern Suburb of Beirut where many of the displaced population from Ayn al-Mreisi moved, other neighborhoods adjacent to the area such as Hamra Street and Ras Beirut. I present the ways residents of the city talked about the

past (prewar and wartime period), the present (postwar era of construction), and the future. My work examines a set of complex socio-economic networks moving beyond ethnic and class boundaries to include socio-economic and political networks within the city as well as regional and international connections. Avoiding Mullings (1987) critique of urban anthropologists who "locate their tribes within the city," this is not an ethnography of a single group or neighborhood, rather it is an ethnography of multiple urban spaces and sites and the ways they are used, negotiated and remembered by various groups and individuals.

### **Anthropology of Space and Place**

Until recently social theories tended to treat space as "dead, fixed, un-dialectical, and immobile" while time was associated with "richness, fecundity, life, and dialectic" (Foucault 1980: 70). Influenced by Foucault's definition of space, a number of the studies theorizing the complex relationship between space and time tend to focus on how space is produced by powerful groups and individuals to dominate, discipline, and control the less powerful.

Space is an outcome of unequal relations between the powerful and the "ordinary practitioners of the city" (deCerteau 1988: 93). Space as a locus of power is also examined through studying the colonial attempts to redefine local spaces through modernizing and organizing them (Mitchell 1988; Wright 1991), governmental efforts to restructure urban spaces (Ribeiro 1989, 1994; Holston 1989), efforts to discipline bodies and souls through spatial structures (Wilson 1991, 1005; Foucault 1977; Yiftachel 1995). Similar studies presented the concept of the concept of the colonial city, which is a product of specific historical context. Colonial cities are described as socially, racially and culturally plural. The relationships between the 'natives' and the colonizers are based on domination and control which, enhance the separation between social classes (Yeoh 1996; Al-Sayyad 1992; King 1992). What these studies do not address is the role of the less powerful social actors and marginal groups in shaping the plans and agendas of the powerful decision makers for urban space.

Revisiting Foucault's definition of space as a "fundamental [factor] in any exercise of power" (Foucault

1986: 252) these social theorists emphasize that space is not a mere container for social activities but that "the social is spatially constructed" (Massey 1993: 70), space encompasses the physical borders of social relations (Pred 1984; Giddens 1983), and "the production of space is shaped by power relationships, practices, and identities" (Soja 1989). Space shapes and affects people's socio-economic networks, agendas and the ways they view their past and history. Space is important in the creation of individual and group urban identities and loyalties. When members of less powerful group "illegally" claim a specific locale by using and living in it, this claim empowers them through granting the members the opportunity to negotiate for legal rights for urban spaces. Yet the physical use or the direct occupation of space is not the only way to claim, reproduce, and access it. In Beirut, the ways people narrated and remembered contested city spaces defined the future of these places as well as the identities of their users. While dominant actors were demolishing, bulldozing, rebuilding, restoring and controlling postwar Beirut's physical urban spaces, "ordinary practitioners of the city" who were excluded from the reconstruction process were

searching for alternative ways to compete for the same spaces. They challenged their exclusion and claimed these same spaces by constructing alternative historical accounts of these spaces by recalling their prewar and wartime experiences and memories. Residents of the city often recalled selective spatial memories and past experiences, claimed emotional connection to specific sites and denied the same rights to others. This meant the "interpretations of place or landscape were constructed through the human ability to interplay the past and the present existence of a place; the social behavior accommodated by the place; and the symbolic and communicative aspects of place" (Low 2000: 47).

During the war, the "Green Line" --the no-mans land that divided the war-torn city of Beirut into two, West and East, which meant Muslim and Christian respectively. With rare exceptions, those who lived in one part of the city never crossed to the other part. Accordingly, over the years, East Beirut became foreign, unfamiliar, and

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<sup>3</sup> The Green Line ran through the downtown area dividing it into two. Areas surrounding the green line became strategic locations and battlefields for militias that changed throughout the war.

inaccessible for most of those who lived in West Beirut and vice versa. In this case the part of the city where residents were not allowed to live or enter is prohibited and physically inaccessible. While many of the wartime sites and spaces had become accessible after the war, new places, such as downtown Beirut, had been deemed off limit after they were turned into sites for international development projects. Both the wartime and postwar prohibited spaces became symbolic spaces --sites of nostalgia--. That people could only access through their memories. For example, when the reconstruction company Solidere demolished the prewar markets of Beirut, many people started to revalue their personal and collective memories about these lost and endangered sites. Remembrances of prewar and wartime experiences and the nostalgia towards that past are ways of expressing feelings of loss and exclusion and helplessness of the present.

Similar to the powerless groups and individuals excluded from the process of reconstruction, investors, developers and governmental institutions who have power over the physical rebuilding of the city are shaping the Beirut's past and history through the deployment of new

meanings to selected urban spaces. They are designating buildings and spaces as historically valuable landmarks and erecting monuments and removing or relocating others based on specific interpretations of the past that suits their present and future interests.

Discourses of the past are cultural reconstructions of time and space (Alonso 1994; Boyaran 1994). Spatial experiences and memories are "not innocent and neutral, but invested with power relating to social position and relationships with others" (Tilley 1996: 11). The "ordinary practitioners of the city" rely on their past experiences and memories of selected urban spaces to secure a role in determining the future of the spaces they are using. To accommodate and even appropriate the voices of the less powerful, hegemonic groups recurrently reshape their discourses of urban planning and design, and announce promising plans to "protect the heritage" by preserving selected urban sites or monuments. The competition over appropriation, use, preservation of urban spaces between the dominant actors and the "ordinary practitioners of the city" leaves us with the following questions: How do memory and remembrance affect the power relationships embedded and

manifested in the complex process of negotiation over space? How do disenfranchised groups strategically use and manipulate space to evade attempts by the powerful to "discipline" them and regulate their spatial relationships and activities?

### **Changing Methodologies and Identities**

Choosing one neighborhood in Beirut to do fieldwork involved a number of hindrances. It is a challenge to conduct research in a changing, transitional and "non-traditional" anthropological fieldsite such as Beirut. Generally, anthropologists tend to travel to "small and simple" communities, and avoid sites and communities characterized by "complexity, literacy, historical depth, and structural messiness" (Appadurai, 1986). Documenting the postwar era in Beirut is a challenging task. The physical landscape in the city is changing constantly. Neighborhoods are disappearing within few months, buildings are dynamited while others are constructed, new highways are paved, others are blocked, and the whole downtown area is demolished to rebuild a new city center. Similar to the changing landscapes, the relationships among the

inhabitants of the city and their relations to the spaces they use are distorted. Thousands of the war displaced population are evacuated from spaces they "illegally" used, some landlords are restoring their war-torn homes and businesses while others are selling their properties to investors and developers and many of the city residents who fled the country during the war are returning to Beirut.

Like many other urban centers, residents of Beirut employ various strategies in their daily lives to survive the challenges of living in an intricate urban environment. Strategies inhabitants of the city use dictate the identities they proclaim, the formal and informal relationships and the socio-economic and political networks they establish. The daily activities and the networks of Beirut residents are not confined to a specific locale, such as a single neighborhood or area. They go beyond the neighborhood to include other neighborhoods in Beirut, other regions in Lebanon as well as neighboring countries and internationally.

Like the residents of the city, the researcher has to claim some identities and renounce others at various moments of the research period. Throughout my fieldwork I

described myself and my interlocutors described me in different ways: according to nationality (real and pretended), university affiliation (in Beirut and New York), profession, and marital status. Whichever identity I declared affected whom I could interview and what information they would share with me.

On my first visit to Beirut in June 1995 I assumed I was travelling to an area culturally and socially similar to my own cultural background. Speaking the same language, and growing up and living in neighboring Arab countries, I assumed Beirut, its people, their practices and cultures would be accessible and familiar to my anthropological mission. I was wrong for the following reasons:

First, I was surprised to find that being a Palestinian and non-Lebanese was a limiting factor when I spoke with many Lebanese people. Since Palestinians in Lebanon were associated with living in refugee camps, many of my informants were puzzled that I could still identify myself as a Palestinian<sup>4</sup> even though I did not live in a refugee camp. This put me outside the stereotypical social

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<sup>4</sup> Palestinians who managed to acquire Lebanese citizenship did not identify themselves as Palestinians in public.

frames and placed me in a transitory situation. During conversations about my background, my Arabic dialect, and my research, people would comment in my presence "she is so friendly, as if she is not a Palestinian." Such a comment was meant to be a complement and was used to imply that the speakers accepted me.

Conducting fieldwork immediately after the war was an added challenge for a Palestinian researcher since Palestinians had been involved in the civil war combat, and for many Lebanese the civil war was "the war of others fought on the Lebanese soil." The Palestinians were among those blamed for bringing their battles to the Lebanese soil. Even Lebanese who were sympathetic to Palestinians challenged my identity and research in a different manner. Some questioned me for not conducting research among Palestinian refugees who live in miserable conditions. This led to discussing and debating a number of issues. The objectivity of the researcher who is studying his/her "own people," the role anthropologists and other social scientists in implementing and participating in social and political change and finally the differences between the research agendas of local/indigenous and outsider/Western

researchers. Interestingly, other researchers around me (French, German, Swedish, and American) were not questioned in the same way about their choice of subject, or about the role of their research on social and political change.

On a number of occasions, especially when I sensed my Palestinian identity might cause problems, I identified myself as a "researcher from Jordan" (I carried a Jordanian passport during my fieldwork). Such situations created an assumed alliance between the speakers and myself, and some expressed their acceptance for me by stating "we both [Lebanese and Jordanians] suffered from the presence of Palestinians in our countries."

Another identity I declared was that of a researcher coming from New York City affiliated with American University of Beirut (AUB). When I presented my research project as a guest speaker to a graduate anthropology class, the professor introduced me by saying, "she is coming all the way from New York to study Ayn al-Mreisi - just one neighborhood! This is how Americans do anthropology." The affiliation with the American University of Beirut facilitated appointments with officials at governmental institutions, journalists, politicians, as

well as local communities. Frequenting AUB put me in contact with other researchers, scholars and graduate students.

Another identity which affected the data I gathered was being a single Arab woman. Three days after renting a furnished apartment in Ayn al-Mreisi, the woman who lived next door brought her smoking water pipe and came to have coffee with me. Her first comment was "I did not see you hanging any laundry on your balcony. You do not have children -- I wish God will give you some soon." My neighbor's statement carried a number of questions for which I had to provide answers. When the neighbor learned I was single and did not have children, she asked to use my balcony for her own laundry. My neighbor sought to obtain answers for the questions of other neighbors since it was assumed single women who rented furnished apartments in that neighborhood were prostitutes. It did not take the people of the neighborhood long to determine I was not a prostitute through observing my daily schedule and the clothes I wore. Later on, a friendly neighbor told me "before letting you into our homes [for interviews] we watched you. You did not stand on the street corner after

sunset to pick up customers, you dressed differently, and you wore eyeglasses. We knew you were not the usual kind of single women who rents furnished apartments." This placed me outside people's existing categories -I was not an insider, nor an outsider, only a subject for their gazes and observations.

My many identities were critical especially when I was meeting a person for the first time. In later meetings, my interviewees and informants decided on identities for me, and these assumed identities filtered the kind of information and interpretations I gathered and shaped the outcome of the research project. For example, many of the people I interviewed found it strange that I inquired about daily life practices. Some remarked that such questions are usually asked by foreigners *ajanib* -- meaning Westerners. This forced me to explain and define "anthropology" to many of the people I interviewed. One of my neighbors explained me to others by saying, "she collects stories about 'Beirut of the past' *Beirut zamman*. She is writing a book about the history of our neighborhood," or "she is writing a history of the original people of Beirut." Although I was collecting stories of the present, the importance of my

work lied in collecting memories and documenting the "past."

My identity as a researcher from the region was challenged at the end of my stay in Beirut, when, after leaving for what was supposedly a three-day conference in Cairo, I was prevented by the Lebanese airport authorities from re-entering Beirut. My identity as a researcher affiliated with a number of research institutions and "connected" with "influential" people in Beirut could not override my identity as "Palestinian" --which meant a refugee-- and as such I was not granted re-entry to my field-site, not even for 72 hours in order to retrieve my fieldnotes. Arriving in New York without fieldnotes, I had to rely on my own memories in the field to write about the ways Beirutis remembered their city and talk about their pasts; or to come up with alternative strategies to retrieve my notes. I was fortunate when a friend and colleagues came back from Beirut and brought back most of most of the research data.

By recounting these hindrances I do not mean to underestimate the advantages of being from the region, which gave me access and understanding of other aspects of

the daily life in Beirut. For example, I acquired the status of "colleague" among many Lebanese intellectuals and social scientists. Many of them discussed with me the findings of the research they were carrying out, invited me to participate in formal gatherings (lectures, workshops and conferences) and informal meetings. This environment exposed me to informal and intimate discussions about the history and the identity of Beirut and its people, and allowed me to participate in debating the future of social sciences in the region. Such encounters enriched the data I gathered regarding the discourses of the reconstruction project, and made intellectuals concerns and discourses an inevitable part of the ethnography.

Accessing official and published materials necessary for the research was a major obstacle. As a result of the sixteen-year civil war, locating the right place to access documents and governmental reports was almost impossible. During the war, many of the governmental documents such as reports, maps and city plans were burnt, lost, damaged, or moved to other locations within the city. The few state agencies that continued to function during the war had to relocate their offices to "relatively safer areas," and

some of them had to have two or more offices in the divided Beirut. For example Beirut Municipality, which was located in downtown Beirut before the war had to rent two buildings one in West Beirut and another in East Beirut. Furthermore, in the postwar era, the overlap in the responsibilities of the private sectors and the different governmental and non-governmental agencies add to the challenge of locating documents. Finally, many of the governmental offices and institutions did not have materials to give out documenting their previous and ongoing activities and future plans.

In addition, statistics and census material continue to be highly politicized issue in Lebanon. For example the first and the last national census was conducted in 1932 by the French mandate administrators. According to this census, Lebanon is the only country in the region with a Christian majority (51%). Based on this, significant government posts are divided among the religious groups: the president of the country is to be Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the house Shiite Muslim. This system of representation is applied to all governmental posts, even today. This made demography and statistics a highly politicized issue. Every

attempt to conduct a new census is resisted by several sectarian groups. Sectarian groups and agencies provide divergent and conflicting numbers; estimates of the size of each group are always questioned and falsified. For example, before holding parliament elections or choosing neighborhood leaders *Mukhatars*, sectarian groups (whether over represented or under represented) accuse other groups of exaggerating or understating the size of its members in order to trade the group's votes for securing political gains. The available statistics and numbers regarding the size of the country's population, or their sectarian affiliation are mostly politicized, and statistical estimates vary from one source to the other.

As illustrated earlier, Beirut is undergoing major transitions. There are major changes in the physical landscape, population, and a rewriting of the city's histories and pasts. In postwar Beirut, changes in the physical landscape were accompanied by changes in the everyday terminology residents of Beirut used to refer to intimate and familiar city spaces. Carrying out fieldwork

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see Ahmad Beydoun (1999), Gilsenan (1996), Machnouk (1994). See Asad (1994) on the politics of statistics.

in such a complicated urban context made it difficult to distinguish and comprehend the layers of meaning in people's daily vocabulary. When I first arrived in Beirut in 1995, I was astonished and confused at the responses to my questions about what was going on in the downtown area, and what were people's opinions about Solidere's reconstruction project. The initial and immediate responses I got were mostly jokes and cynical and sarcastic comments about the reconstruction project. This made it difficult to draw the line between what was a joke and what was true or real. Many described what was going on in Beirut as a conspiracy *mu'amara*, or as nonsense *tajleet*.

In my first field trip to Beirut in 1995, people referred to the downtown area as *al-balad* or *wast al-balad*, which literary means the country or the center of the country. For prewar residents of Beirut, *Al-Balad* was the downtown area that housed the city's main markets, businesses and entertainment. The downtown area continued to be known as *al-Balad* during the war, but this time it was the center of the battlefield of the fighting militia.

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<sup>6</sup> The word *balad* in Arabic means country, and in daily life means the city center, or the downtown area.

During my second visit to Beirut six months later, people referred to the downtown area *al-Solidere* or the ruins *al-athar*. When I first heard it, I thought they were referring to the building that accommodated the offices of the construction company *Solidere*. But the residents used *al-Solidere* to mean the entire postwar downtown area confiscated by the real estate company *Solidere* to rebuild the future Beirut. Residents of Beirut believed the city center would never return to what they experienced before and during the war. Many expressed fear that they would not have access to the future downtown. This demonstrated how prevalent the reconstruction discourse was in shaping people's lives and changing their daily vocabulary, including intimate and familiar spaces.

In view of the above mentioned challenges, this ethnography documents a specific moment of Beirut's history. It records a transitional and an in-between and between phase. There are dramatic changes in the physical structure of the city, changes in the ethnic and familial relations among the residents of the city as well as several attempts to re-write the history of the country and the city. In addition to the above transformations, the

lives of Beirut's residents are shaped by global relations and events taking place in other parts of the world; and the future of the city itself is affected by the interests and agendas of regional and international investors, developers and the local residents who are active agents in the process of rebuilding the future Beirut.

These realities compel urban anthropologists to develop creative techniques for integrating various types of data into a larger interpretative framework. To accommodate all these challenges, this ethnography documents a number of sites and spaces in postwar Beirut, the ways they are used, remembered and narrated by those who are allowed or prohibited from accessing them. This ethnography is based on data I compiled based on "hegemonic texts" such as published and unpublished memoirs by residents of the city; news paper articles written by historians, architects, and archaeologists; official and non-official reports from government agencies, investors and developers and political parties; and discussion papers from conferences and workshops that were held at different places in Beirut itself as well as in other countries. In addition to the above documents I interviewed officials,

political and religious leaders, architects and urban planners, as well as the "ordinary practitioners of the city" such as the fishermen, the displaced population, tenants and property owners, and regulars cafes and coffeehouses.

### **Narratives of Destruction and Construction: Stories of Urban Planning and the Death of a City**

The postwar era in Beirut is characterized by the production of a number of published texts that document the writers' experiences of prewar and wartime days. These texts include: memoirs, novels, and historical and archaeological books as well as films and plays. In these writings there is a longing for a desired wanted past and calls for protecting the city's contested pasts and concerns about its threatened heritage. Memoirs with nostalgic titles such as: *Beirut in the Heart* (Jarkas 1996), *Oh for those Old Days you Ras Beirut* (Bubayz 1986), *Beirut Fragments* (Makdisi 1990), *Memory for Forgetfulness* (Darwish 1995), *Nadia, Captive of Hope: Memoir of an Arab Woman* (Kanafani 1998) *A Wish that will Never Come True: June-October 1982* (Trabulsi 1984) *Our Beirut* (Itani 1996), *Beirut the Heritage* (Al-Khatib 1993) and *Beirut: Morning*

*Beauty* (Machnouk 1994) all these writings record the writers experiences and thoughts about the past and the heritage of Beirut. Novels such as *Beirut Blues* (Shaykh 1995), *The Story of Zahra* (Shaykh 1986), *Beirut Nightmares* (Samman 1997), *Leaving Beirut: Women and the Wars Within* (Ghoussoub 1998), *The Little Mountain* (Khuri 1989), *City Gates* (Khuri 1990), and *The Stone of Laughter* (Barakat 1990) and films such as "West Beirut: Coming of Age in a Time of War," "Between Us Two Beirut" and "the Civilized" wherein the authors shed light on social and political aspects of the war and many condemned the war and criticized the participants in it by proving that the war started and ended and no one knew the causes they are fighting each other for.

Simultaneously, architects, sociologists, urban planners and economists produced a genre of analytical texts criticizing the reconstruction project and occasionally suggesting alternatives. Amongst these titles are: "Beirut and the Real Estate Crusade," "Rebuilding Beirut and the Lost Opportunity," "Beirut of Tomorrow;" "Peace for Lebanon: From War to Reconstruction," and "Beirut Reclaimed." Many of these publications are the

outcome of conferences, meeting and workshops held in Lebanon, France, England and the United States.

In addition to the memoirs, novels, films, and critiques of the reconstruction project, there are a number of historical books and publications documenting Beirut's 5,000 of history. These historical accounts are the outcome of the city's unstable present and its unknown future. Beirut's history and pasts are contested domains among its current multi ethno-religious residents, each group claims rootedness and attachment to the city by providing convincing arguments. When writing the history of Beirut, authors draw attention to certain aspects of the past and silence or ignore other moments of the city's prolonged and ancient history. Thus, it is impossible to accept or reject one of these narratives of Beirut's pasts as the actual history of the city. Since there is no shortage of writings about Beirut's history, I am not claiming to write another 'real' unified history of Beirut. Instead, I will present some contradictory readings of the city's long contested past. I will describe some of the stories of destruction and construction that are portrayed in both written and oral historical accounts postwar era of reconstruction.

A number of the historical accounts written after the war report that Beirut was destroyed and rebuilt many times due to wars, natural disasters and the betrayal of its residents. Generally, these historical accounts begin by describing ancient Beirut as a prominent Mediterranean port and a meeting ground for 'strangers' who settled in Beirut for its opportune location. This same strategic position made it a center of conflict in which prominent leaders fought each other to control the city. As a result of this competition the city was destroyed and rebuilt several times over the centuries. Those who destroyed the city were viewed as "outsiders" and "strangers" *ghuraba'a* while the ones who built it and stayed there despite the destruction were described as the faithful "sons" of Beirut. In most of these accounts, periods of decay are presented as a deviation from the normal state, even though some of these periods were longer than peaceful time.

One of the oldest stories about the death and the rebirth of Beirut goes back to the days of the Phoenicians.

In 147 BC there was a man named Eskandar Balla who claimed to be the king [the outsider, illegitimate leader] of Beirut. A vigorous war took place between Balla and the legal king Dimitryous II. Beirut

honorably defended its legitimate king who won the war. Later on Tryphon, Eskandar Balla's minister made a deal with Antokhous VI the son of Dimitryous and attacked Beirut, destroyed its buildings, and burnt it. It is believed that Beirut remained a destroyed city for 100 years. (Shikhou [1926] 1993: 32)

The same story is quoted with some modification in a number of books and when people tell the history of their city. According to the above account it is the strangers and the strangers who attacked the city, but Beirut managed to defend itself and its legitimate king who rebuilt it. Later on, the city was destroyed again as a result of a conspiracy between the outsiders and the King's traitorous son.

In other stories the destruction of the beloved city resulted from the anger of the gods, earthquakes and enemies, which is interpreted as a punishment to the disloyal corrupted inhabitants of the city who did not appreciate the gods' gift of a unique prosperous town.

In the recent memoir *Oh for Those Days Beirut'* by the *Mukhtar*<sup>7</sup> of Ras Beirut area, Rbeiz describes ancient Beirut

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<sup>7</sup> The *Mukhtar* is a neighborhood local leader officially appointed by the state.

as "one of the most ancient Phoenician cities, i.e. it is the oldest city in the world" (Rubayz 1986: 13). Similar to many historical accounts about the glorious past of the ancient Beirut, Rbeiz lists a series of events that took place in Beirut. It was a large Roman city in 64 BC. Then it became a center for the arts, theatre and law. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, it became the site of a major Roman Law School. In 349 an earthquake destroyed parts of the city, which was followed by a series of earthquakes in 494, 502, and 551. After the last earthquake, the sea backed up for a mile and its strong waves returned and destroyed the rest of the city. At this time, the infamous Roman school of law was totally destroyed (Rubayz 1986: 14-15). Later on, its loyal citizens rebuilt it one more time. But in 610 a fire burnt all the new buildings of the city and completely damaged it. One of the surviving residents at that time wrote these words on the tongue of the destroyed Beirut.

I am one of the most pessimistic cities, and the least lucky... I saw the dead bodies of my sons in my yards and God of fire shot me with hot burning arrows. Today the god of the sea flooded me with its angry waves. Where is my glorious beauty? My glorious days were taken away. I became mere rubble ...Oh passersby

cry for my bad luck and cry for the shrinking Beirut”  
(Rubayz 1986: 15)

Later on, the Arabs took over Beirut in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, then the Crusaders towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and the Ottomans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During these times Beirut suffered recurrent destruction, death and rebuilding and prosperity (Badr 1983). More stories of construction and destruction took place at the times of the Ottoman rule, at the end of the nineteenth century and after the end of the World War I. The Ottomans named Beirut a 'Turkish vilayet.' Until 1853, Beirut was a walled Ottoman small town. It had six gates and was surrounded by gardens. The medieval wall was demolished to allow urban expansion in 1840 and in 1876 more of the wall was removed to allow the city to expand over the neighboring hills (Murni 1987). Ottoman plans for developing the city resulted in the demolition of "large areas of [Beirut's] medieval fabric" (Salam 1998: 122-123). The Ottomans flattened many of the dense commercial and residential areas to build 15-meter avenues and governmental buildings. Although the Ottomans drafted a comprehensive plan for developing the city, the plan was never finished. Yet they

left behind huge architectural monuments. Among them is the Sarai, where the Ottomans had their government and officials on top of a hill overlooking the downtown area and the sea. Currently, the Sarai, is being renovated by Solidere to host the offices of the CDR.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Salam (1998), who viewed the Ottomans as outsiders and destroyers of Beirut; Davie has described the Ottoman era as characterized by controlled urbanization accompanied with the imposition of aesthetic norms, the provision of infrastructure in a coherent regional vision, and the participation of large portions of the population in shaping the urban fabric. The Ottomans opened public gardens, schools, and hospitals, and their rule "was marked by the generalization of the quintessential Beiruti invention, the three-arched, red-tiled roof family house" (Davie 1998: 3)<sup>8</sup>.

World War I disrupted Ottoman plans and the Italian bombardment left Beirut in complete ruins. In the 1920s,

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<sup>8</sup> The Council for Development and Reconstruction

<sup>7</sup> In the postwar era of reconstruction, the red-tiled houses are considered the traditional Beiruti houses that are worth preserving. There are various calls to restore them to keep the city's heritage and identity.

the French ruled Beirut and continued the Ottoman task of ordering the city. The French urban planning schemes resulted in further destruction of the existing structures and the construction of new ones. Boulevards and public places were given European names such as Clemenceau, Allenby and Foch for streets and Place de l'Etoile, Place de l'Opera and Place Charles de Gaulle. In the same way, the French presence changed the architectural fabric of the city by introducing French style buildings. The new architecture replaced the old since the affluent members of the society copied the French architectural style. Similar to the Ottomans, the French drafted a number of plans for Beirut, but these plans were never completely implemented.

Like the Ottomans, the French influence on the history of Beirut is debated among scholars working on Beirut. Some view it as an ordering and constructive experience, while others see it as a negative colonial experience that destroyed the city one more time. Asem Salam, a Lebanese architect, views the French plans of Beirut as a salvation from the destruction inflicted by the Ottomans. The same schemes are criticized others. The French "found an old city partly demolished, and immediately developed an

ambitious scheme for its improvement. New axial roads were established and named after French and other Western European celebrities and a renovation [plan for] the city center [was drafted]" (Salam 1998: 122-123).

To Davie for whom the French were colonizers, their influence was not positive. He points out the city the French took over in 1918 already had a vibrant business center, with distinct architecture and a coherent urban plan. "The French military authorities planned the capital almost as if it was a North African colony. Their first action was to surround it with barracks, then to link the port to these defensive points. The second action was to destroy the heart of the city and reorganize the road system, mirroring the Place de l'Etoile in Paris" (Davie 1998: 3).

The French left the country in 1943, and Lebanon became an independent state with Beirut as its capital. Independence was accompanied by economic prosperity for the flow of capital from oil producing countries; and money brought by immigrants from Syria and Egypt after the nationalization of the economy of these countries. Beirut became an important financial, cultural and educational

capital of the region. The economic and cultural prosperity attracted immigrants from other parts of the country as well as from neighboring countries and worldwide. The arrival of large numbers of people created urgent need for housing, markets and office space. Shiber<sup>11</sup> described the urban chaos resulting from the influx of people to the city "The downtown area was over-built by the addition of supplementary floors on top of the existing buildings and in the in-filling of all open spaces, stimulated and sustained by intensive land speculation ... agglomeration spread along the main arteries, swallowing up the beaches and crawling up the scenic mountain slopes" (Tabet 1993: 85). The poor immigrants and newcomers lived in crowded neighborhoods within the city. The squatter areas in Beirut's outskirts became to be known as *hizam al-bou's* (Misery Belt).

The influx of newcomers to the city is seen as the main cause of urban chaos in Beirut. For example S. Khalaf and G. Denoeux argue that 'urbanism' did not become a way of life in prewar Beirut because traditional ties and loyalties continued to be strong in urban neighborhood.

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<sup>11</sup> Shiber quoted in Tabet (1993: 85).

Informal networks based on kinship and sectarian and religious affiliations became stronger among the rural immigrants in the urban environment of Beirut. For example, most of the nongovernmental associations were confessional, communal or familial in character (Khalaf and Denoeux 1988: 181).

In 1950s the government presented a plan to organize the city. Interestingly, it was a revised version of a plan drafted by the French architect Ecochard during the French Mandate in Lebanon. In 1952 it became the first master plan for Beirut (Salam 1970). The fate of this plan was similar to the earlier Ottoman and French plans, it was never carried out completely. It only resulted in the demolition of more of the old urban fabric in order to expand streets and solve the problem of congested traffic.

The period between independence and 1975 (the beginning of the civil war) is described by many as the 'golden days' in the history of modern Beirut. Writers and authors eternalize the prewar era by remembering and portraying the past days with longing and nostalgia. Lebanon is portrayed as the Switzerland of the East, and the city of Beirut as the Paris of the Arab World, the

jewel of the Orient, the east's window to the West, the refuge for political opposition, an island for freedom of speech, and the most cosmopolitan center for the East Mediterranean.

From 1975-1991, the devastating civil war destroyed much of the physical urban fabric of Beirut. The war resulted in the displacement and uprootedness of many people in Lebanon in general and in Beirut in particular. It is estimated that half of the population had been temporarily or permanently uprooted from their homes (Charif 1994; Faour 1991; Trendle 1991)<sup>11</sup>. From a population of 3.5 million, almost one-third emigrated; an additional 800,000 became internal refugees, and over 150,000 were killed (Percy 1995: 6-7; Kisirwani 1997: 87). In Beirut, one quarter of all dwelling units were damaged or demolished. According the Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) (1996) one quarter of all dwelling units nationwide had been damaged or demolished.

Despite the destruction caused by the way urban renewal projects were not halted completely. Each time there was a cease of fire, the successive governments

attempted to rebuild the downtown area<sup>11</sup>. In addition to governmental efforts, residents of the city participated in the wartime construction. Property owners, tenants as well as the displaced population continuously repaired their damaged properties and places they were occupying, added more floors to accommodate displaced family members and relatives, and built new buildings in relatively safe areas (Sarkis 1993).

Although the war lasted for almost two decades, it is portrayed as momentary, temporary and exceptional time or in the words of novelist Ghada Al-Samman (1997) "a series of nightmares." In literary works, wartime divided destroyed Beirut is described as a ghost town<sup>12</sup>, in other cases, it is personified as a woman, specifically as a prostitute that is available to all strangers<sup>13</sup>, as a lonely

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<sup>11</sup> The country's total population is estimated at 3.5 million. More than half of them lived in Beirut.

<sup>12</sup> For information about the detailed plans during wartime see Khalaf, S and P. S. Khoury *Recovering Beirut: Urban Planning and Post-War Reconstruction*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Elias Khouri (1990)

14 N. Kabani (1988)

widow, or a mother who gave birth only to unfaithful children<sup>15</sup>.

The war officially ended in 1991 after the Taif Accord. The postwar era is characterized as the era of reconstruction and rebuilding. A major reconstruction project is currently underway to rebuild the war-torn downtown area. The project is described as the largest urban reconstruction project of the 1990s worldwide. The reconstruction of the physical space in Beirut (conducted by international and regional developers and investors, Lebanese elite, and urban planners) aims at reclaiming for Beirut its previous role as the cosmopolitan center of the Middle East. Many individuals and groups have been drawn into discussions about how to reconstruct the future Beirut, while at the same time conserve its past and the histories of its 18 ethno-religious groups. Toward that end the new Beirut is being promoted as "An Ancient City for the Future."

The narratives of the city's past are influenced by the uncertainty and unpredictability of the present era of reconstruction. Also, these same narratives are shaping the

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15 J. Said-Makdisi (1990)

discourses and the debates surrounding the reconstruction project. Comparing the two accounts about both the Ottomans and the French mentioned earlier, the past of the city is debated and contested. There is a disagreement regarding who is the insider or the outsider and loyal sons or the strangers. There is no agreement on who worked for or against the city. It is crucial to analyze these accounts of the past at the time when the histories of the city is being re-written, its physical structure is being shaped, and at a time when Beirut is being destroyed and rebuilt one more time. Part of the discourse around the current reconstruction project involves issues similar to the above mentioned historical accounts of the Ottomans and the French. Deciding who is an outsider and who is an insider, who is rebuilding the city and who is destroying it became a contested domain among investors, historians, urban planners, intellectuals and residents of the city. In the following chapter, I discuss and analyze the discourses surrounding the reconstruction of downtown.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Discourses Surrounding the Rebuilding of Downtown Beirut**

#### **Touring Downtown Beirut**

Solidere organized a number of activities in the midst of what was left of the destroyed buildings in downtown Beirut. In order to introduce its plans and to familiarize investors, tourists and city residents with of the future

downtown area, Solidere offered free tours in French, English and Arabic. The participants in the tour met the guide in front of the building hosting Solidere's offices, in the heart of the destroyed central district. The tour began with a visit to large air-conditioned white tent nearby to view an architectural model of the area. Using a laser pointer the guide showed the group the model's miniature streets, governmental offices, residential areas and sites of worship. The sightseers were then driven by bus through the empty construction site, making stops at the recycling project (demonstrating environmental sensitivity), archaeological sites (where archaeologists were unearthing artifacts/heritage to then be documented and relocated to an archeological park), visiting the vacant houses of worship, mosques and churches, and stopping by a building under restoration, when the visitors were given hard hats for safety. Finally, the two-hour tour ended with a lecture by a high-rank employee at a Solidere's meeting room, who explained the economic aspects of the reconstruction project -- and the recent movement in the price of shares in the company.

This chapter discusses the discourses surrounding Solidere's reconstruction project in Beirut's Central District. It addresses the effects of project on the daily lives of the city. Then it presents the responses of the individuals and groups who were excluded from participating in defining the future of the city. Influential individuals and groups who have access to "hegemonic texts" such as writers, architects, intellectuals, archaeologists, historians and social scientists criticized and opposed the project by publishing articles, holding conferences and meetings discussing Solidere's plans. The less powerful challenged the destruction caused by Solidere's bulldozers through evoking their prewar and war-time spatial memories, issuing a religious casuistries fatwas or using gossip in informal gatherings. Both the influential participants and the less powerful were concerned about the threatened past and heritage of Beirut, and claimed rootedness in various urban locals.

A number of individuals and concerned groups participated in debates surrounding Solidere's project to rebuild Beirut as "An Ancient City of the Future." The participants ranged from those directly involved -urban

planners, state institutions, architects, and politicians – to those who felt a moral or historical connection – political and religious leaders, intellectuals and historians and the excluded the pre-war users of space – property owners and the war displaced population. In whose image and to whose benefit is space shaped and reconstructed? How is space influenced by powers of domination? (Harvey 1989: 177-178) How does the inclusion and exclusion of spatial memories take place? Which sites and locations to be preserved for the future? And for whom?

In order to answer the these questions I will discuss how certain binaries such as public/private, past/future, traditional/modern, hegemonic/powerless and remembering/forgetting are constructed and questioned through the representations and interpretations of space/place and time/history in rebuilding downtown Beirut. The construction of the physical urban space through the above mentioned binaries is crucial in the manufacture of a contested national imageries by the various sub-groups, communities and identities.

### **Background: An Absent State**

During the 16 years of civil war in Lebanon from 1975-1991, the state and its institutions failed to provide the services and safety they had provided before the war. Militias and political parties took over government agencies and institutions, the army, the city and the whole country. Soldiers and policemen deserted their positions and joined militias based on sectarian affiliation<sup>16</sup>. By the late 1970s, militias and charitable organizations were the only providers of services to the inhabitants of the Beirut. Militias had become highly effective politicomilitary machines, who developed large and sophisticated bureaucracies and provided public services that included collecting taxes, running educational institutions, providing health services, controlling markets and ports, and operating radio and television stations and newspapers (Denoeux 1993: 92). They intervened in the daily lives of residents of the city, by solving conflicts and providing emergency housing for the war

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16 Even secular, revolutionary and non-religious parties functioned and operated in a similar way to the sectarian war militias. Many of them were established around a traditional leader. The case of Kamal Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party is an example. For more details see Abu-Khalil (1985: 32).

displaced population. People solicited militia members to protect them and their property and in return they paid protection money. Under these circumstances, sectarian affiliations grew stronger during the civil war. Residents relied on connections with sectarian militia leaders for securing food, shelter, security, employment, water, and electricity. Thus, sectarian or confessional identity had become a viable medium for survival. "Without it [confessional identity], one was, literally, rootless, nameless, and voiceless. One was not heard or recognized unless one's confessional allegiance was disclosed first. It was only when one was placed within a confessional context that one's ideas and assertions were rendered meaningful of worthwhile" (Khalaf and Denoeux 1988: 192, 196)

The devastating 16-year civil war formally ended in 1991 after most of the combating parties signed the Taif Agreement. Accordingly, a new legitimate government was formed, the country's constitution was revised giving more power to under-represented confessional groups (particularly granting Sunni Muslims more power), and most of the militias were disarmed. Postwar government's

institutions were being reshaped and subjected to interference by political parties, traditional leadership, militias, sectarianism, and most recently regional and international developers and investors. The challenge for the postwar government were restoring the authority of the state, reunification of the army and the police forces, the rehabilitation of the damaged infrastructure, reconciling the conflicting groups, solving the problem of thousands of displaced families, rebuilding the war-torn city and most importantly securing enough financial resources. What are the challenges associated with rebuilding postwar Beirut? And What are the contexts of the emerging discourses presented by the various city inhabitants?

#### **Plans to Rebuild Downtown Beirut: Solidere**

Despite heated discussions and disputes concerning the details of the reconstruction plan, there was a consensus on the need to rebuild Beirut's city center for the following reasons: Reconstructing central Beirut was seen as economically important since the city was the financial center of the Middle East before the war in 1975. It was also psychologically important since it was a place where

different sects and ideologies interacted, and reconstruction was presented as a way to help healing the wounds of civil war. Samir Khalaf (1994) describes the pre-war city center as a peaceful site for the mingling of opposites: The rural/urban, Christian/Muslim, Lebanese/Palestinian, Sunni/Shi'a, religious/secular, rich/poor and local/international once mingled together. For Khalaf the rebuilding of Beirut's Central District was intended to create a city where previously warring factions may live and interact in relative harmony in what was named as the future "melting pot" (Khalaf 1994).

In 1992, billionaire entrepreneur Rafik Hariri<sup>17</sup> became prime minister and formed a new government. Reconstruction became the priority for Hariri, who established a number of private development and construction firms. To solve the financial burdens, the government granted regional and international investors and developers a major role in postwar reconstruction and rebuilding of Beirut's Central District. The government adopted a long-term plan called Horizon 2000, it planned on the complete privatization of

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17 He was the prime minister at the time when I did my fieldwork.

the whole area. Hariri financed the large scale projects through regional and foreign investors and capital, loans and grants from the European Union, the World Bank, UN agencies and Arab countries.

On May 1994, the private company Solidere (Societe Libanaise pour le Development et la Reconstruction de Centre Ville de Beyrouth, or (The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District), with the complete support of the Hariri government, had been appointed to finance, restore and oversee the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Beirut Central District (BCD) which was most affected by the war. Solidere was described as "Hariri's profit-making puppet, criticizing its plans to build Manhattan-style skyscrapers as 'vulgar'" (Martin 1994: 3)

Solidere introduced its project as the largest worldwide urban redevelopment project of the 1990s. One of Solidere's aims is to create a central district, internationally competitive with other cities of the Eastern Mediterranean by regaining its prewar international role.

The reconstruction project encompassed the BCD area, once the main commercial district, and the city center. The project covered 1.8 million square miles including 608,000 square miles of reclaimed land on the sea front. The build-up area is planned to include offices, commercial centers, residential buildings, government offices, cultural facilities, and hotels. The remaining area will consist of government properties including roads, utilities, and public gardens (Solutions Groups SARL 1997: 47).

Solidere's capital consisted of the shares of property right holders, owners, tenants, and stock market shares within the BCD. According to the plan, the owners and tenants whose property was confiscated by Solidere were to be allocated 50% of the company's total shares based on the estimated value of their property, and the other half was earmarked for outside investors. More than 200 companies from Western and Arab countries were to take part in the project (Beyhum et al 1992).

In Beirut [before the war] ... an international community felt very much at home ... a mixed community of 40,000 lived there, a microcosm of Lebanon's multifaceted society. [Beirut] was pre-eminent in banking, financial services, insurance, maritime

agencies and other commercial office and trading functions that serviced both the region and the whole of the Arab world (Gavin and Maluf 1996: 36).

Solidere's "massive reconstruction of downtown Beirut was seen as a must-do action to announce the end of war and the beginning of return to normality" (Kabbani 1996:8). Solidere's principal aim of downtown's reconstruction project was to recreate the 'microcosm' of Lebanon. In order for Beirut to regain its prewar role, "she"<sup>18</sup> should revive its downtown area.

... The character of the prewar city center and the special nature of the place - its history, association with sea and mountains, economic role in the region and links with east and west-- are real assets. These will be brought to life once again through the reconstruction of the Central District (Gavin and Maluf 1996: 12-13).

In addition to Solidere, most of the concerned groups and individuals (decision-makers, investors and developers, and residents) agreed that the future Beirut should regain its previous role as the main city in the region for

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18 *Madina* is a feminine word meaning "the city." In literature describing prewar and wartime Beirut, many authors referred to Beirut as a woman.

services, finance, and culture. Many believed that rebuilding Beirut's city center was a way to heal the wounds of the war and the return to normality. The downtown area was described as the heart of the city, and its pasts and identities were to be preserved. The questions that left unanswered were, what kind of previous roles the future Beirut should maintain? and who had the authority to define city's pasts and identities?

Beirut's reconstruction provoked vigorous debate concerning the future and the pasts of the Beirut. Participants in this discourse included: Funding agencies (which had different techno-economic interests); urban planners and architects (whose main concern was to the aesthetics and physical appearance of the city of the future); Lebanese social scientists, historians and writers (who championed the call to preserve the city's cultural heritage and pasts); "traditional" local, religious and political leaders (whose concern was to maintain their power, influence and followers); prewar users of the space, such as tenants and property owners; displaced groups who occupied different spaces in the city during and

after the war; and semi-governmental institutions like the *Waqf*, the organization that managed religiously endowed property.

### **Ignoring Beirut's Pasts and Invoking the Memories of the Residents**

Concerned groups and individuals criticize Solidere's plans for only considering the physical appearance and the future revenue. The plan ignores the social aspects of reconstruction, public interests and needs, residents' diverse historical pasts, and their memories of intimate urban spaces and places (Al-Abdulah 1993; Beyhum et al 1992, 1996; Corm 1994; Dajani 1994; Dnawi 1994; Hobeika 1993; Khalaf 1991; Khalaf and Khoury 1993; Khoury 1995; Labaki 1993; Seeden 1993). The plan is designed as though the old center has never existed, even though "people have not yet forgotten the city center ...[they] are attached emotionally to their previous places" (Nasr 1993: 65).

While the reconstruction company destroyed the city center, dynamited the buildings and bulldozed the streets, many of the residents (both powerful and

powerless) expressed sorrow and pain at seeing the downtown area disappearing and many of the city's old architecture being removed. The massive postwar destruction in the downtown area provoked many Beirutis to document their personal prewar and wartime experiences and memories and to express the pain they felt about the damage caused by Solidere's bulldozers. One writer described with nostalgia his childhood memories of walking happily in a number of places in the old downtown area: "[I remember] the alleys where we used to wander around as children, the *kunafa* (a traditional Middle Eastern dessert) places, the small shops with colored glass, the Martyr Square and the streets that were crowded with pedestrians." The author moves in time to depict with sorrow what he witnessed in the era of reconstruction.

Yesterday we visited a ghost town laying in the midst of the dust of its destroyed buildings surrounded with the noise of big construction equipment. The photographers were pointing their cameras waiting to document the minute of destroying the Rivoli [a prewar movie theatre]. ..Minutes later, the Rivoli shined with the huge light of the explosion and the dust covered the

whole area. At that moment the sign of the 'Orient' that survived the war collapsed on top of the body of the dead building. This huge pile of rubble buried beneath it our childhood cries, as well as the dreams of many Beirutis (Al-Safir, April 6 1994).

Opponents of the project viewed the reconstruction company as a source of destruction, since they deemed it responsible for dismantling Beirut's past and the residents' memories. In one of the more poignant critiques of the effects of reconstruction on memory and on the past, Elias Khoury (1995), a Lebanese novelist and journalist expressed his anxiety and mistrust of the project and was worried about the city's future.

Beirut attempts to regenerate itself by recycling garbage and destroying its own memories. The city center appears as an empty space, a placeless space, and a hole in the memory. How are we to preserve the memory of this place in the face of such frightening amnesia?

People articulated their sense of loss and helplessness in the face of Solidere's money, power, authority and bulldozers. Feeling that everyday life

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19 Before the war, the building housed a major theatre and various offices and shops.

no longer had its taken-for-grantedness, they invoked the past by remembering specific landscapes, landmarks and detailed spatial experiences. This process of remembering was a cry for recognition and protest against the exclusion from deciding the future of their city. In the above quotation, childhood memories were used as tools to demonstrate a right to an endangered and threatened city space. The helplessness of the city dwellers and their inability to stop Solidere's planned destruction of the city was strongly portrayed through describing the photographers, cameras in hands, waiting to document the collapse and the death of a major city landmark. The publication of these accounts in daily newspapers made people's private memories part of the public sphere and not a matter of the private act of remembering.

The challenge many Beirutis faced in the postwar era to find the means to protest against Solidere's attempts at urban erasure. Khoury alerted people to a frightening amnesia. Destroying Beirut's history and forgetting its past were predicted through the emptiness and the hollow

spaces in what was left in the downtown area. Forgetting Beirut's history and ignoring prewar and wartime experiences became a major concern for many intellectuals. The question remains, however, what memories and past(s) of the city are to be preserved? how? and by whom?

Archaeologists, historians, architects, urban planners, social scientists and writers expressed the common concern that Solidere's plan appeared to be designed as if the area had no history, ignoring the Beirut's identity, and its population's emotional and cultural attachment to urban spaces. The archaeologist Suzy Hakimian (1994:17) underscored the importance of cooperation among architects, archaeologists, and promoters, and emphasized that archaeological and historical preservation should not be an obstacle to the reconstruction project. Many others advocated the designation and preservation of select buildings and monuments (Nasr 1993:65). Architect Jad Tabet recommended preserving historical sites in order to enhance "the city of the future" in a form where the past and future intertwine providing historically imbued spaces and symbols around which new ideas and activities may be structured. Tabet presented examples of cities where the

"Tabula Rasa"<sup>20</sup> method was used, Le Havre, Tokyo, and East Berlin. He argued that this method is now abandoned and is replaced by the restoration and rehabilitation of city centers, as in Bologna, West Berlin, Lisbon and Mexico City. Tabet recommended Beirut follow the restoration method rather than the "Tabula Rasa" (Tabet 1994:79). The intellectuals' discourses that criticized the reconstruction project could be summed up by saying that the participants wanted to modernize and rebuild downtown Beirut, but at the same time they wanted to conserve the city's identities, past(s) and heritage should be conserved.

### **Claiming and Saving Historically Valuable Sites**

Despite the calls to designate a number of buildings and monuments as historically valuable and preserving the city's past, intellectuals and Solidere opponents did not define whose past and which heritage was worth conserving - - in other words, which buildings -- they wanted to salvage and for whom. There was no consensus about what aspects of

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20 Tabula Rasa method is where the city center is completely demolished and rebuilt with a new design.

the past had to be remembered or preserved and which part had to be forgotten and destroyed.

In response to the intellectuals' general demand of conserving the city's past, Solidere hired architects, archaeologists and urban planners. Some of them were among those who criticized the initial plans and who had formed a committee to single out "historically valuable" buildings in downtown area for consideration. Accordingly, 265 buildings and monuments were designated as "historically valuable" (Solutions Group SARL. 1997: 48). These buildings were meant to be symbols of Beirut's architectural heritage "to imbue the new city center with symbolic and aesthetic references to the past" (Percy 1995; Director General of Antiquities of Lebanon 1995). Additionally two neighborhoods, Al-Saifi located east of the city center, and Wadi Abu Jmil to the west, were to be renovated and used as future residential areas.

Solidere employed a new approach to present its plans to the public. It presented itself as the protector of the city's past and the guarantor of its future by generating the slogan *Beirut madina ariqa lil mustaqbal* (Beirut an ancient city of the future). Usama Kabbani, the head of

Solidere's Department of Planning, explained that the Solidere's intention was to build a future modern city that would have continuity with its past. He believes considering the city's past would empower its future. "The reconstruction of the past opens up opportunities for a better future." He claimed the need to maintain historic precedents to establish continuity with the city's memory and history. The renewed city would thus speak to future generations from its own memory" (Kabbani 1996: 18).

Yet, Solidere's new approach of incorporating the city's past did not satisfy all opponents of the project. Detractors argued that, while a positive step, the restoration of selected buildings simply detach them from their social and historical context. One male artist I interviewed described the result by saying, "the buildings looked like small creatures in the midst of a jungle of cement and glass. Solidere only preserved the skin of the building and the inside was emptied of history." The exterior might look the same as before, the artist said, but its function, its owners, its users and the meanings of these buildings would be different.

These opponents to Solidere's project succeeded in exerting their influence on the city's future plans through producing what could be called "hegemonic texts," meaning having accessible print. Indeed, experts have published a number of books, booklets, brochures, and articles promoting their views. Such texts pressured Solidere to modify its plans a number of times to accommodate some aspects the opposition point of view.

Unlike the intellectuals, many of the "ordinary practitioners of the city" who did not have the same access to "hegemonic texts" thought they were excluded from deciding the future of their city. In their attempts to actively participate in the construction agendas of the physical space, they utilized new forms of identity and self representation, developed daily opposition strategies in the form of public speeches, demonstrations and gossip, issued religious and legal casuistries, and created new vocabulary using reconstruction terminology.

Sheikh Ahmed, the leader of the Islamic Group *Al-Jama'a Al-Islameya*, criticized the reconstruction

project and voiced suspicions about the intentions of both the government and Solidere over restoring Beirut's heritage. He viewed the project as a conspiracy against the city's original people by taking away spaces used by the poor for social and spiritual activities. He added:

Solidere's only concern is to bulldoze buildings that survived two decades of war and to replace them with glass towers and sell them to non-Lebanese rich people. What happened so far is that Solidere demolished the houses and popular markets and left the people of the city with bitterness and grief<sup>21</sup>.

Sheikh Ahmed acknowledged his political group's opposition to the project of issuing a religious casuistry *fawa shareya* that makes it illegal to buy Solidere's shares, and/or participating in its schemes. The majority of the followers of the previous Islamic group were mostly less powerful individuals of society. The followers often used the casuistry to assert their disapproval of Solidere's project, and to explain the reasons for not taking an active role in it.

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21 From a personal interview with the leader of the Islamic Group.

Abu Sami, a long-time resident and a small business owner in downtown Beirut, lost his business and home during the war, and opened a small grocery shop in Ayn al-Mreisi neighborhood. He was hoping to go back to his business in downtown Beirut when the war was over. He expressed his dissatisfaction and helplessness towards the reconstruction. "What can we do," he said "they [Solidere workers] took over everything, they throw away the bones of my father and mother into the sea. If I want to visit my mother's grave, maybe I will have to visit one of Solidere's glass towers." Abu Sami was referring to an Islamic cemetery located in Beirut's downtown area that had been bulldozed by Solidere to make room for new development. Abu Sami waited for the war to end, hoping to go back to his prewar business. The war ended, Abu Sami not only lost his business in downtown area, but he could not stop Solidere from wiping out the tombs of his parents and relatives. The way Abu Sami responded to the postwar reality was by criticizing Solidere initiative by talking to his customers in his small shop located in an adjacent

neighborhood to downtown area. He and his customers sat in front of the shop making jokes about members of the postwar government and the politics in the country in general as well as remembering with content the days of the past. The examples of Sheikh Amhad, the leader of the Islamic and Abu Sami the shop owner are examples of the ways marginal groups and individuals participate in the debates about rebuilding downtown Beirut. The Islamic groups is issuing a religious casuistry to prevent people from cooperating with Solidere and Abu Sami and his neighbors make jokes and gossip about the political leadership.

In a context where the national priority is given to a massive reconstruction project, some individuals and groups believed that they might be able to influence the project or affect it by challenging their exclusion from participating in shaping the future plans of the city. Some local residents responded to the rebuilding project by drafting their own mental maps, "imaginary geographies," and developed new vocabulary in an attempt to be active

participants in reconstructing and claiming the city's past and future.

In a conference about Beirut, the previously mentioned architect, Jad Tabet told the following story: In an archeological dig under a demolished building, the first layer revealed what seemed to be a Muslim shrine, and the Sunni Muslims wanted the digging to stop. The next day young Shiite men --were members of the Hizballah party--, arrived to guard the site and manage the many Shiite Muslim worshippers who came from all over the city to pay homage. A few days later the *Mufti*, the highest Muslim Sunni religious authority in Lebanon, issued a religious statement that the shrine was a tomb of a Sunni religious teacher and it was not a Shiite shrine. The Shiites who had claimed the site for a number of days left it. Archaeologists continued their digs. In the next archaeological layer, archeologists found a Byzantine structure and a number of women from Beirut's Greek Orthodox community demonstrated at the site to stop the digging. Maronites wanted to dig further to reach a Phoenician layer.

Every archaeological layer evoked conflict over history, memory and attachment to a specific past. Each of the groups who tried to claim an archaeological layer was doing so to prove its presence in the city's history, and to negotiate a role in the city's present and future. Each group wanted the archaeological excavations to stop at a layer that represent its past and preserve that moment of the past. At the same time these groups did not other communities to claim the same attachment to the city's long pasts. For example, the Sunni and the Greek Orthodox -who see themselves the original residents of Beirut-- viewed the Shiite and the Maronites as outsiders, because they immigrated to Beirut from rural areas and other areas of Lebanon. When the Shiites attempted to claim the Shrine, and the Maronites asked to reach the Phoenician layer, both groups were asserting a connection to the city's past by claiming rootedness to the city's "heart," the downtown area.

David Lowenthal in his book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1998) states "each people supposes their newly inflated heritage concerns to be unique, reflecting some trait of character circumstance, some

spirit of veneration or revenge that is peculiarly their own. Some impute these concerns to patriotic ardor, some to nostalgic fantasy, others to specific needs for mourning or celebrating" (Lowenthal 1998: 4). Interpreting the past could turn historic buildings and environment into a politically charged heritage. What is preserved depends on who chooses and what they perceive history to be (Tiesdell et.all. 1996: 16)

Restoring Beirut's contested pasts and reviving the memories of its residents are part of on going debates about the meanings of *al-turath* heritage, *al-asala* authenticity and *al-hadatha* modernity among contemporary Lebanese intellectuals and concerned individuals. There are various calls for the reviving the "heritage" and maintaining the "authentic" in order to pull together a strong and a unified people that is capable of facing the threats of the outside and the non-authentic "western modernity." Heritage is seen as a tool for bringing together the multiple ethno-religious groups in a unified national frame. Immediately after the war ended, a number of conferences were held to define 'Lebanese heritage" and

'popular culture' and reiterate the importance of preserving the threatened history of the country and its people. Joseph Baseel (1994) discusses the outcome of the First Convention of the Lebanese Popular Culture held in December 1993, which featured among the participants the Minister of Media, The Minister of Internal Affairs, The Minister of Tourism, The Minister of Culture and Higher Education, two Parliament Members, The Director of the Hariri Foundation, Professors at the Lebanese University, researchers, and writers. The author argues that the Lebanese popular heritage is the accumulation of the experiences and presence of many succeeding governments and armies, and the interaction of a number of peoples and civilizations over thousands of years. The participants in the convention see Lebanese heritage as collective, unique, divergent and multiple.

The Lebanese journalist and writer Baseel acknowledges that there might be variations in the elements of popular culture among the Lebanese people, but these differences are based on the region rather than on the sectarian affiliation. The author concludes, that popular culture and heritage exceed sectarian affiliations and social classes.

In order to prove his point, Baseel states that Christians in the Shouf area share the same heritage with the Druze in the same region, and the tribal mentality of the Shiites in the Hermil is shared by Maronite Christians in Bshiri area. The participants in the conference recommended that the state and cultural and academic institutions should play a key role in collecting and preserving the country's heritage and popular culture.

Examining the contributions of the participants in the conference, it is clear that there is no consensus on the definitions of terms such as culture *thaqafa*, popular culture *thaqafa shabeya*, elite culture *thaqafat anukhba*, tradition, and heritage. At the same time there is a general agreement on collecting and preserving heritage, traditions and memories of people. Looking at the examples presented by the participants, they are attempting to create links with the a valued past, that is of rural traditions such as proverbs, songs, fables, marriage traditions, and interestingly a number of religious rituals that need to be preserved, restored, collected and replicated. Heritage remains the concern of the elite, who wants to safeguard selective aspects of the life-styles of

ordinary people by claiming them as a public property and part of the nation's past.

Debates on authenticity and modernity, the importance of protecting the heritage and preserving selective aspects of the past is not unique to Lebanon. It is part of an on-going discussion in the other Arab countries, as well. For example, in an article documenting the proceedings of a meeting held in Syria on "Reading the Heritage: The Open Text and the Closed Text," Mohammad Tahan (1993) introduces the divergent meanings and definitions of heritage and the importance of restoring, preserving or rejecting certain aspects of the past presented by the participants in the conference. "Al-Turath [heritage] is what was produced in the past and continued to exist among us in the present. It is our cultural memory we keep either consciously or mythically as Arabs, Muslims and human beings." He added, it is important to admit that the Arab thought is going through a crisis in dealing with heritage. Heritage is not the problem of the past, but rather it is the problem of the present through which we pursue the future (Tahan 1993: 129).

It is logical to ask why and how heritage become a matter of concern. The postwar state of emergency in Beirut placed residents of the city in situation where they are uncertain of their own future, the future of the city and the country. Many doubt the promises of the leaders, and the plans of the reconstruction company. They believe they are excluded from creating the future of the postwar city and many are afraid they wont be able to continue to live there. In response, the past is idealized as a refuge to replace an unpredictable future. They return to a past that is familiar and simpler that is faraway from the unpleasant present and the foreign future.

### **Reconstruction Permeates Vocabulary**

### **Election Language Incorporated Reconstruction**

All walls, lamp posts, entrances of private and public buildings, shop windows and even the few palm trees in the city were covered with colored posters, banners and flags promoting parliamentary candidates. These blurbs were inviting local residents to vote for the doctor, engineer, lawyer, educator and the son of Beirut who would work to heal the wounds of the war-torn city by implementing the

right construction agendas. The candidates and their advocates claim they deserved to have a representative of Beirut in the Parliament for the following reasons:

He is concerned about bulldozing our ruins and history in the name of reconstruction. He is the one who stepped in front of the bulldozers to protect the history of Beirut...

In addition to his belief for the need for a Museum for the ruins, he is calling for establishing a special museum for the city of Beirut (From the election campaign of Mohamad Kabbani 1996)

His major concerns are: liberating the occupied land, repairing the educational system, and supporting the reconstruction project so Beirut becomes the payer niche of all cities *qiblat al-mada'in* (From the elections campaign of Hussein Ali Yatim 1996)

The marriage between authority and money in the 1996 elections will only produce a large number of 'illegal children.' This is not acceptable in the twentieth century democracies... It is not true that sectarianism is dividing the Lebanese, because they all praise one god, which is money.

We all should be alert to this era .. The era of the bulldozers and steamroller *mahadel* ... on this major turn we cannot leave it for the drivers of the bulldozers to slow the machines of destruction, this

will cause lots of harm to the history of our city  
(from the comments of Isam Numan after he lost the  
1996 elections)

In the parliament election's campaign the candidates either strongly supported or opposed the reconstruction project of downtown Beirut. The project was a priority on their agendas. Those who supported or opposed the project were concerned about preserving the threatened heritage, memories and the city's past. To support their candidacy, competitors expressed their concern about the threatened heritage of Beirut and willingness to challenge the construction company by all means including blocking Solidere's bulldozers by their own bodies. The vocabulary used during the election campaign reflected the priorities and the concerns of the Beirutis and their candidates. Words such as bulldozer, and steamroller were used to describe the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Parliament. Residents of the city accused official carrying out the reconstruction project of neglecting peoples needs and the city's past and heritage as their only concern was to maximize their personal benefits. Later on, politicians labeled as bulldozer and steamroller appropriated this

criticism and used these words to describe themselves, in order to suggest their strength and power. The previous election blurbs assert that the reconstruction project of downtown Beirut was shaping and 'reconstructing,' the lives of the residents by creating new daily realities, social relations, expectations and vocabularies.

Prime Minister Rafik El-Hariri,<sup>22</sup> who played a crucial role in the reconstruction process, described Beirut as *warchi kabiri* (big construction site). He named his electoral assembly as the *kutlat al-inma' w-al-i'mar* (The Group of Development and Construction) with the slogan *bina' al-bashar wa al-hajar* (the development of humans and stones) in response to opponents who accused him of ignoring the needs and the interests of the people, of focusing on maximizing his wealth, and for appropriating the local discourses. Words such as re-building, reconstruction, and re-development" were on the agendas of all religious and political groups as well as on the agendas of the powerful such as the Prime Minister Hariri.

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22 He was the prime minister at the time when I did my fieldwork. The current prime minister is Salim El-Hoss.

The reconstruction project had shaped the vocabulary and agendas of Beirut's inhabitants as well as its political leaders. It also brought to the surface new concerns and conflicts over notions such as the past, heritage and familiar and prohibited urban landscapes. This can be seen in the ways people portrayed and narrated their prewar and wartime memories, historie(s), and the spaces they occupied. These narratives also constructed people's attachment to their city and redefined what they considered as local, personal and historically valuable.

To make the city "alive" and perhaps to re-familiarize the marginal residents with the future downtown, Solidere organized some public activities in the downtown area where the past and the future intertwined. One of the activities where the past was commemorated was the hosting of the Beirut Annual Arabic Book Exhibition in a huge temporary tent in the midst of the dust of the destroyed buildings. The organizers invited publishers from neighboring countries and authors signed books and read from their work. The same exhibit was an annual event before the war that was halted during the years of conflict. To celebrate the future, the International Industrial Exhibit Ma'arad

*al-Sina'at al-Dawli*, was hosted in the same tent and location. In this exhibit export and import companies exhibited mostly construction materials and building equipment from different countries, while real-estate companies and brokers sold and advertised apartments and houses in various parts of Lebanon.

Another activity that took place more than once a year in the Solidere area, was a flea market *souq al-barghouth*. This market was one of the old markets that physically existed in downtown Beirut before the war. In the new downtown, the physical bazaar was demolished and the flea market was hosted in the same large tent in Beirut's Central District. In this market, antique dealers presented their goods, which ranged from expensive eighteenth century European furniture, Orientalist to paintings, to old tools and antique jewelry. In all of these activities, there were a number of food stands selling traditional Lebanese snacks and fresh fruit juices, ran by many of the families who owned many famous prewar restaurants and food places that existed in Beirut's Business Central District. Many of the owners of the food stands continued to use the names of restaurants or food stands they once owned in prewar

downtown area. Inside the large tent, these owners made sure to print the phrase "previously located in the downtown area" demonstrating authenticity and experience in the business. Although the foods stands were hosted in Solidere's tent in the middle of the postwar downtown area, the owners wanted to assure themselves and their customers that they once served their customers in the same area. One of the owners said that his grandfather and father ran the same juice place in downtown Beirut, but now they only have a temporary corner when Solidere decided to have an exhibit. He stated, many of his customers stopped by the juice corner, bought drinks and talked about prewar downtown area.

### **Local histories and Urban Planning**

Any community claims histories, and it is often impossible to locate a single narrative for a contested past. Each group within a community reconstructs its pasts with selective images which suit its present needs and future ambitions. "Daily anxieties and agendas have extraordinary influence on the images we construct of a privileged, genealogical useful past, a past in which we exclude unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives" (Said

1993: 15). Bakhtin (1986) has suggested that literature is part of, and therefore cannot be understood outside, the 'total context' of a given period's culture. Socio-economic factors and political conditions affect the ways the past is narrated through the process of including specific elements of the past. Foucault (1977) suggests that historians should understand the rhetorical context within which the politics of memory become constituted. For Foucault the past is continually being remodeled in our present discourse about the future. What is remembered about the past depends on the way it is represented, which has to do with the power of groups in constructing their representation (Foucault 1977:152-160). Each group recalls specific moments of its claimed past, in which its members defended their rights, property and space. These moments become sites of nostalgia, and other moments become prohibited sites and they are abolished from the daily vocabulary and collective memories.

Urban planning may be seen as a form of spatial domination and control of the ways communities construct their pasts and narrate their collective memories. It is a confrontation between urban social movements and planners,

and the politically and economically dominant regimes. How pivotal is the role of the state as a hegemonic force that limits the choices of people? How do various groups develop their agendas regarding the future and the pasts? (Williams 1989). Yiftacher (1995) presents the political confrontation over space among the Israeli government and the Arab ethnic minority in the Galilee where planners and politicians enforce repression and fragmentation in the name of urban reform and development. In the case of postwar Beirut another question remains: How have international and regional investors and developers shaped the histories, memories and urban landscapes in the absence of a strong state?

In postwar Beirut, the competition over urban places and spaces played a crucial role in shaping the social and political relations in the city. Here I would argue that space became a resilient concept, by which I mean a non-fixed or a fluid notion. There were attempts to fix urban spaces by textualizing certain landscapes (neighborhoods, buildings and monuments) by considering them historically valuable for the whole nation, which meant attaching history to them. This is clear through what is called

"place attachment" that lies in creating imaginary geographies which allow particular sites to become associated with certain values, historical events and feelings. This leads us to Foucault's concept of "heteroropia," the designation of places "outside of all places,... places which are absolutely different from all sites that (people) reflect and speak about" (1986: 24). Pointing to the importance of constructed cultural meanings that influence the perception of the places in which people live, Setha Low (1989) argues that: "there is a difference between the cultural values, rules, and perspectives of people who design and build housing and those who use them." In Beirut, Solidere fixed sites by institutionalizing them as historic monuments and textualizing them. Solidere's project which tends to change the structures and uses of the area, gradually detaches the residents of the city from places they experienced and known for generations. Places that once were familiar became foreign and perhaps prohibited. The following example demonstrates this inverted reality:

In April 1997 Solidere and the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University organized a conference

entitled "Projecting Beirut." In the exhibition associated with the conference, a number of posters, slides and maps presented images of the future downtown Beirut. The images projected a negative image of reality. The downtown area was projected as colorful and lively, where small boats in the water, pedestrians dressed in with colorful clothes, lovely cafes filled with customers and plenty of open green spaces. The rest of the city (on the maps and posters) was portrayed as colorless, empty and without any signs of life. At first glance an observer would believe the downtown area was full of life while the rest of the city was dead and empty. In reality, the downtown area was physically "empty" from any kind or urban activity except for a number of trucks and bulldozers, and construction workers wearing Solidere labeled hard hats.

Spaces people label as being empty can hold a multiplicity of meanings. McDonogh (1993) sees emptiness as going beyond the designation of open urban lands to denote those spaces that are undefined, or those in which the definition is indistinct because of unresolved conflicts over meaning. Emptiness that McDonogh suggested has crucial

urban significance, or at least "empty spaces" are charged with meaning.

Although Solidere portrayed the future downtown as full of life and the rest of the city as dead and empty, residents of Beirut employed the concept of empty space in other contexts. When people talked about the dramatic Israeli invasion of Beirut, the streets and the city itself were described as being empty although Israeli tanks and army were filling streets. In other contexts, emptiness was used as a desired concept, Beirutis who remained in the city during the war spoke proudly of their efforts to keep the apartments of neighbors and relatives empty, by protecting them from being occupied by the war-displaced or militia-men. Empty places were culturally and socially meaningful in the city narratives. Some people described the neighborhoods when they first moved -- 40 or 50 years ago-- as empty, meaning that these neighborhoods were not as crowded as they were at the time they told their stories. The people wanted to prove they played a role in establishing the area and witnessed its growth by making it not "empty." In other situations, when telling the history of an area or neighborhood in the city, the narrator often

excluded certain groups or people by referring to an area as "empty." In such narratives the speakers exclude and even did not see other users of the same spaces.

## Chapter Three

### "Lets Wait and See":

#### Ayn al-Mreisi a Neighborhood in Transition

##### Introduction

Building from the description of one Beiruti neighborhood, Ayn al-Mreisi, I go on to show that this neighborhood illustrates what is happening generally across Beirut: the temporality and unpredictability of the postwar era. The lives of the residents are on hold, the physical space is changing constantly, the resources are not stable, everything is in flux, and no one seems to know clearly "how to play the game," and how the city works. Property owners are planning on selling their estates to investors

and developers, tenants have to find alternative housing or demonstrate their legal right to keep their homes and displaced population are negotiating for higher compensation. Since there are many actors involved in the process of rebuilding, residents of Ayn al-Mreisi find hard to locate the right governmental agencies or private institution in the long process of negotiating for urban rights and services. Specifically, the chapter explores the relationship between wartime tenants and property owners, which is colored by uncertainty and gives detailed examples of the ways the postwar emergencies extends to affect the very relations between family members, neighbors, political groups and old and new residents of the neighborhood.

Ayn al-Mreisi is a multi-ethno-religious neighborhood where each group construct its own maps of the border of the neighborhood, and each group has a different vision on how to rebuild and/or conserve specific parts of the neighborhood. This chapter presents detailed examples of the various groups who live in the area.

## **Changing Landscapes and Alliances: Ayn al-Mreisi**

When riding the sarveec<sup>23</sup> to Ayn al-Mreisi, one encounters a multiplicity of landscapes and spaces. Old and new structures stand alongside modern and traditional shops, and residents from all socio-economic classes and sectarian groups coexist. The sarveec car drives along the Corniche highway (officially named Rue de Paris), which separates the neighborhood from the sea. Along the eastern side of the highway stand a number of buildings under construction, many of them newly built and others are renovated or still under construction. Construction machinery surrounds the sites. Huge, colored banners draped on the buildings illustrate the future finished building while advertising the availability of its luxurious apartments and offices, as well as the responsible engineering firms, real-estate agent, elevator companies, and property owner.

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<sup>23</sup> The sarveec (from "service") is the most common form of public transportation in Beirut. A sarveec is a five-passenger Mercedes. The sarveec does not have one specific route or destination. One can stop a sarveec and inform the driver of your destination. Then he decides if your destination is on his way, and if so, you negotiate whether you pay a single or a double fare.

The sarveec is a place where riders openly exchange stories, engage in political discussions and make jokes. Often when the sarveec passes one of the newly erected buildings, a passenger make a comment about how the investors buy and build these luxurious apartments and offices. They describe the investors as "those who made their money during the war" or simply say "oil money or Gulf States dollars, money from Africa!"<sup>24</sup> A moment of silence usually follows these statements, as the speaker waits for more comments from the rest of the riders in the sarveec. Once, a man sitting next to the driver commented: "these buildings are not built for the Lebanese or the Beirutis who protected their city during the war. On the contrary, they are constructed for strangers *al-Ghurba*. A new passenger gets into the sarveec and immediately engages in the on-going discussion, adding "I just lost 10,000 US \$ to one of those thieves who call themselves investors. He [the investor] promised the depositors high interest rates

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<sup>24</sup> Oil money or Gulf dollars refer to people from either the Arab Gulf states who are investing in real estate in Beirut or the Lebanese who made their money by working in the oil producing countries and investing their money in Beirut. The Africa money stands for the Lebanese (mostly Shiite Muslims) who worked or who are still working mostly in West Africa.

for investing the money in construction. I believed him, gave him my life savings, and now he disappeared. He left the country." Other passengers sympathize with him and said that they heard that story through the media, and assured him that God shall compensate him with patience and serenity. Such conversations could be interpreted as disapproval of the acts of the investors and developers. However, I would argue that these discussions suggest helplessness -- an inability to challenge the current reality.

Among the gigantic newly constructed buildings stand a number of shorter buildings known as the "traditional Beiruti houses" *al-buyoot al-bayrouti al-taqlidyeh*. The yellow sandstone houses usually have two to four floors, roofed with red tiles, with balconies overlooking the street, and are surrounded by small walled gardens. The walls surrounding the gardens and houses themselves have so many bullet holes that seemed part of their original architectural design. Some walls are recently patched here and there to fill in bullet and rocket cracks and holes. The gardens of these remaining "traditional Beiruti houses" contain a fountain, a lemon and a jasmine tree, and beds of

herbs and flowers. According to the residents of Ayn al-Mreisi, European architects and designers built these houses for upper and middle-class merchants working in the city center between the 1920s and the 1950s. Although probably less than a century old, and probably built after French style architecture, the "traditional Beiruti house" has become a valuable and endangered symbol of the past that should be preserved. In Ayn al-Mreisi over the years, apartment and commercial buildings replaced many of these houses. Displaced families currently occupy most of the few remaining "old" houses, and the Syrian army uses some as military posts.

The passengers who condemned the investors' and developers' buildings do not mention those adjacent buildings occupied by the Syrian army. In this case, the speakers have erased such spaces from their mental maps especially in the presence of "strangers"<sup>25</sup>. (Talking about or criticizing the existence of the Syrian army in Lebanon

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<sup>25</sup> In this context a "stranger" does not necessarily mean a non-Lebanese. Strangers could include anyone you do not trust, or whom you suspect works as an undercover agent for the Syrian government.

is considered a taboo --people are afraid a secret agent for the Syrian police might be among the listeners".

The sarveec passes the campus of the American University of Beirut (AUB), which occupies a large portion of the Corniche on the seaside. AUB faculty and students have access to the beach facing the campus, through a tunnel connecting the university to the seashore. During the summer, AUB blocks the view of the sea with straw fences. As one sarveec passenger explained it, "to protect the AUB girls from the eyes of the passers-by. They are putting a veil on the beach."

After AUB, the sarveec passes a large, empty lot. The metal walls surrounding it are layered with posters for political groups, movies, nightclubs, singers and dancers. This is the site where the American Embassy once stood, before it was blown up in 1983. The embassy does not

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<sup>26</sup> People tell stories about the Syrian control of the country during the war described painful embarrassing experiences crossing Syrian checkpoints. In general, people talk about the Syrian presence in Lebanon only among close circles of friends. Often Beirutis use ironic nicknames to refer to Syrians, such as "the brothers" *al-ashqa'* or the enemies/friends *al-aadiqa'*, newly constructed words not existing in Arabic. *Aadiqa'* is a combination of the word enemies *a'ada'* and friends *asdiqa'*.

physically exist anymore, although it continued to be present on people's mental maps. Residents give directions by saying that this or that house is located "behind the American embassy," as if it were still standing.

The sarveec travels over a small bridge with small, cement shacks under it, and a number of fishing boats turned upside down on dry land. This used to be the Ayn al-Mreisi fishing port. It was appropriated by the luxurious apartment building *Al-Ahlam* (The Building of Dreams), recently built on part of the port. Ayn al-Mreisi fishing port is a significant site in the neighborhood as it is the only remaining fishing port in West Beirut<sup>27</sup>.

On the same side of the street is Ayn al-Mreisi Mosque, built during the Ottoman period and it is one of the oldest mosques in Beirut. On the intersection between the Corniche and the mosque there is an enormous monument with fading black-and-white image of Jamal Abdul-Nasser, the President of Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s. Area residents refer to the monument fondly as the statue of Nasser, or simply "The Statue," a rich symbol of Arab

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<sup>27</sup> I discuss the conflict between the fishermen, the investors and the Municipality of Beirut later in this chapter.

identity. Along the Corniche a few small restaurants and shops serve traditional Lebanese food snacks.

Between these two markers of traditional Arab and Middle Eastern characters, the mosque and Nasser's statue, stands the Hard Rock Café which opened in 1997. The walls of the building hosting the café are decorated with one 12-meter high glass guitar, and two paintings of a young man and a woman in western clothes standing in a phone booth. On the left side of the street, facing both the mosque and the Hard Rock Café is a rusty metal arch called *Bayt al-Muhtarif Al-Lubnani* (House of the Lebanese Craftsman<sup>28</sup>) a prewar structure. On the same side of the street are two pre-war beaches still in business - "Ajram Beach" for women and children, and the second called "The French Beach" for both men and women. Next to the beaches is the Lebanese Artisans, where "traditional Lebanese" crafts are marketed to affluent Lebanese and tourists.

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28 In 2000 an investor renovated The House of the Lebanese Craftsman and it became a fancy restaurant by the sea.

On the main street that leads to Ras Beirut area stands The Beirut Theatre<sup>29</sup> with its wide, arched wood and brass gate, restored to its prewar condition by local artists and intellectuals. One can glimpse the posters for upcoming activities and performances and the photographs of the performers while passing by.

As one travels from the Corniche to the inner streets of Ayn al-Mreisi, the streets become narrower and the buildings closer together. Cars park on both sides of the road, and often on the sidewalks as well. At mid-day there is always a traffic jam. Drivers often step out of their idling cars to buy cold drinks from a shop on the corner. Cars then begin to honk while the drivers curse each other.

The inner part of Ayn al-Mreisi consists of narrow alleys and roads flanked by small, old cement houses with small balconies overlooking the alleys. Workers are repairing a number of buildings, adding more floors and balconies, fixing and renovating old houses and/or fixing holes on the buildings caused by bullets and rockets during

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<sup>29</sup> I present a case study of Beirut's Theatre at the end of this chapter.

the war<sup>30</sup>. Hundreds of wires dangle from the buildings, connecting the apartments with more than one private source of electricity<sup>31</sup>. Below the apartments, small shops and businesses line the streets including butchers, bakeries, small grocery stores, small clothing shops and restaurants open only for breakfast. On the lot of one building that was destroyed during the war, the Kurdish residents of the neighborhood built more than 15 shacks made of cardboard, metal and wood, and started the vegetable market. Many unemployed men "hang out" in the narrow streets and neighborhood alleys. Others sit inside parking lots and in front of shops, playing cards and backgammon, talking, and listening to transistor radios, while they drink traditional Arabic coffee from small paper cups. In the same alleys, housewives walk by after doing their everyday grocery shopping, and children play between the passing

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30 After the war, the city issued a law to legalize illegal buildings and violations of the building codes that took place during the war. The city gave the residents a deadline to pay fines and obtain legal licenses. Before the assigned date, people rushed to add illegal additions so they could legalize them by paying fines.

31 During the war power supplies were stopped and people sought alternative resources by buying private generators, and many people bought power from individuals who distributed electricity.

cars. Neighbors usually talk to shop keepers, to other neighbors and call down to people in the street from their apartment balconies.

In the same narrow streets, one passes recently and poorly renovated buildings carrying names such as "The Broadway," "The Gulf Tower" and "The Star." The owners evacuated the war-displaced living there, and rented to male students and female prostitutes. These dancers and artists work in prewar nightclubs and bars that have been re-opened recently. These bars are located on the Martinaire Street<sup>32</sup>.

Across the neighborhood, surfaces are covered with various messages. At various times of the year, posters, banners, and signs announcing festivities, ceremonies and political activities are posted on the walls of commercial buildings and on the walls and the balconies of the residential buildings and houses. During the Parliamentary elections of 1996, candidates had to compete among themselves and negotiate with property owners and local political leaders to post their smiling photos and

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32 This street was known as the prewar red light district of Beirut.

electoral materials. During the month of Ramadan, various competing political groups decorate the streets with banners, flags and lights, reminding the passersby of the month of fasting, and signifying that Muslims live in the neighborhood. The logos of political parties are painted on the walls of buildings and posted on the windows of shops. During ashora<sup>33</sup> Amal Movement, and Hizballah demonstrate their control over the neighborhood by hanging black and green flags with inscriptions from Quran, sayings of the Muslim Prophet Mohammad, mottos of the Shiite leaders and political statements. These banners indicate the constant competition for control in the area: the group with more banners has more followers and power.

The physical structure and the decorated surfaces one encounters when driving through Ayn al-Mreisi represent the various social groups that compete over the control of space within the neighborhood. While investors and developers erect large buildings and tall towers, local residents try to preserve some of the old structures by fixing and renovating them, deploying their political and religious symbols as they compete over claims to

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<sup>33</sup> Ashora definition from the encyclopedia of Islam.

authenticity and legitimacy in the area. This competition among the prewar, wartime, and postwar users of space is manifested in the ways various groups and individuals narrate their experiences in the spaces to which they lay claim.

### **Constructing Multiple Maps of Ayn al-Mreisi: Names and Borders**

The locals challenge the official name of their neighborhood. In day-to-day life, Ayn al-Mreisi residents never used the Municipality's official name "Dar al-Mreisi," instead they use its local name of "Ayn al-Mreisi." In order to prove the originality of the name Ayn al-Mreisi and to justify using it, residents often tell the following story about the origin of the neighborhood's name and its history:

A long time ago a boat carrying nuns sank in the sea close to the neighborhood. One of the nuns was lucky. She survived and swam safely to the shore. She stayed next to the water spring in the neighborhood. She lit candles to thank God for saving her life. The curious children of the fishermen who lived around the spring came to see the nun. She started teaching them reading and writing. To express their appreciation for teaching the children, the fishermen built a room for

the nun next to the spring, and gave her the title of *Rayeseh* (the feminine word for the chief of the fishermen). The nun became the chief of the children of the fishermen. Later on the neighborhood became to be known as the Ayn al-Mreisi (the spring of the female chief of the fishermen).

Similar to its name, the borders of Ayn al-Mreisi are contested. The administrative borders are different from the borders described by the residents of the area. According to the municipal map of Beirut, Ayn al-Mreisi has the following borders: Ras Beirut area east, the American University of Beirut south, and the seashore boulevard, which is known as Rue du Paris West. Neighborhood residents question the municipal borders. Various users of space in the area depict a number of physical borders and have varying mental maps of the neighborhood. In interviews with both current and previous residents of the neighborhood, some give a broader map which includes the entire area of Ras Beirut. Others include segments of downtown Beirut as part of the neighborhood. A third group considers the American University of Beirut as part of Ayn al-Mreisi. A fourth group limits the neighborhood to one or two of the inner streets. But none of the above uses the

administrative name *Dar all-Mreisi*, or its administrative borders.

The map and borders of Ayn al-Mreisi fishermen were different from the maps and borders portrayed by other residents. Asad, a fisherman in Ayn al-Mreisi for the last 30 years, said: "for me Ayn al-Mreisi is the fishing port, the Corniche Street and the sea itself. For us [the fishermen], we face the sea and turn our backs to Beirut." The fishermen, who are one of the most marginal groups in the area, contest their marginalization by claiming that the fishing port is the most important landmark in the area, because the neighborhood was named after the port. Individuals who provided specific detailed borders believe their definitions are the accurate one.

I am the one who will give you the real boarders of Ayn al-Mreisi. Ayn al-Mreisi is the area that is surrounded by the sea north and west, Bliss Street and Clemenceou Street south, and Al-Huson Port east. This is the real Ayn al-Mreisi. Do not believe anybody who gives you other borders of the neighborhood.

This quotation is from an interview with a former parliament member, who identifies himself as *Ibin Ayn al-Mreisi* (the son of Ayn al-Mreisi). He was born and raised

in the neighborhood and believes himself an authority on its history, residents. He served the area and its people during the war when he was a board member in a number of associations (youth, educational etc.). After the war he was elected to the parliament as a Sunni representative of Beirut- he then ran for the elections in 1996 and lost. According to these borders drawn by the parliament member, AUB campus is considered as part of the neighborhood. This is understandable, given that the speaker is an AUB graduate. Although he does not live in the neighborhood now, he claims belonging and attachment to the area and at the same time, he disavows the same right to others.

Despite the advice of the AUB alumni, in what follows I use a flexible definition of the neighborhood. The borders will change according to the informants I interviewed and based on presenting certain arguments.<sup>34</sup>

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34 I am aware that my definition of the area is a construction. After living in two apartments in different streets in the neighborhood during my eighteen-month fieldwork, the borders of the area changed according to the opinions of the people with whom I interviewed and socialized.

### **Ayn al-Mreisi: Multiple Identities and Loyalties**

Before the war, a number of ethno-religious groups who belonged to multiple socio-economic classes lived in Ayn al-Mreisi. This included Sunni Muslims, Druze, Shiite Muslims, Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenians, and Kurds.<sup>35</sup> Its inhabitants belonged to all socio-economic classes, some worked as merchants at the city center, at the port, as fishermen and at hotels and tourist venues as guides, taxi drivers, and owners of souvenir shops, while other users employed by governmental institutions and the private sector, and the American University of Beirut. Often, residents who belonged to the same socio-economic class lived in the same residential quarters regardless of their sectarian or confessional background. During the war, and as a result of the areas location next to the city center and the Green Line, dividing the two parts of the city<sup>36</sup>,

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35 In the 1996 parliamentary elections, 18 ethno-religious groups were recognized in Lebanon. The representation for each sectarian group in the parliamentary seats is based on the size of the groups as well as their political power on the national level. The space here does not permit a discussion of the historical and contemporary formation of these groups, for an overview see Salibi (1988) and Nassar (1995).

36 Beirut was divided into East Beirut (dominantly Christian) and West Beirut (dominantly Muslim).

many militias competed for the control of the neighborhood. As in the rest of Lebanon, the war resulted in major population movements in and out of Ayn al-Mreisi (Khalaf 1994). Many Christians and some Muslims (mostly Sunni) were forced to move out of the area, while displaced populations (mostly Shiites from south Lebanon and East Beirut), occupied the empty residential and commercial buildings. Some of the prewar inhabitants remained in the area during the war, others left and came back, and some left and never returned.

The war enhanced the existing sectarian/confessional groups and alliances and the formation of new ones. With the complete absence of the state and its institutions, individuals and groups who did not affiliate or identify themselves along sectarian lines before the war were forced into sectarian and confessional linkages. During the sixteen years of civil war, these affiliations did not remain the same, people switched their alliances based on the militias that controlled their areas. No single sectarian group or militia was able to control the same space in Ayn al-Mreisi all the time, and members who belonged to the same religious group often split and fought

each other<sup>37</sup>. Thus, residents switched their alliances from one group to the other. Alongside sectarian groups, non-religious and secular parties existed, yet most of them became to be associated and identified with sectarian groups. For example The Progressive Socialist Party *Al-Hizb Al-Taqadumi Al-Ishtiraki* was a Druze party, and the *Murabitoun* a Sunni party. The militias and political parties along with charitable organizations provided many services and even protection to those who stayed in Beirut during the war. They provided housing for many of displaced families, distributed water and food, provided transportation to hospitals and health centers, ran clinics and schools and cleaned the streets.

In the postwar era, a legitimate government was formed, but it did not meet city residents' expectations in providing all the necessary services. Accordingly, people continued to rely on wartime strategies and means. Those I interviewed believe the cabinet is made of the same wartime militia leaders, and they see the government as a reproduction of the war sectarian structure. Others

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37 For a detailed description about the various war-time militias see Robert Fisk (1990) *Pity the Nation*.

explained the failure of the state's institutions on the lack of financial resources and granting the private sector a central role in the postwar rebuilding projects. For example, when the Shiite displaced residents of Ayn al-Mreisi neighborhood were forced to leave the wartime spaces they occupied they sought support from Amal Movement and/or Hizballah (the two Shiites political parties that were created during the war) and/or from prewar or wartime friends and neighbors who belonged to other sectarian groups, including Sunnis, Druze, Armenians and Christians.

Sectarian or confessional affiliation is not the only way individuals and groups in Ayn al-Mreisi identify themselves. A number of temporary and permanent non-sectarian identities and affiliations existed, utilized and employed by neighborhood inhabitants at various times. Nevertheless most studies of Lebanese society tend to emphasize sectarian and religious affiliations as the only way to analyze and study Lebanese communities. A few exceptions (Khuri 1975 and Salibi 1985) argue that sectarianism and client-patron relationships are invalid means of analyzing the complexity of Lebanese situation. Picard (1996) viewed client-patron relationships between

the powerful and the powerless as fluid and changeable, depending on the social, political, economic and historical contexts. Although residents of Beirut might seek help from the local *zuama* (leaders) who belong to the same sect or place of origin, the same individual employ a number of other connections beyond sectarian and confessional association. They look for help from colleagues in the same profession, or from neighbors and others who share temporary or permanent interests.

People in Ayn al-Mreisi are often hesitant to admit and on many occasions denounce using sectarian affiliation in the process of negotiating urban privileges and rights. In other contexts, they justify using the power of the sect as the only available resort. In Ayn al-Mreisi individuals and groups use or deny their sectarian and/or religious affiliations in the process of obtaining information, accessing power, and negotiating for urban rights. Neighborhood residents combine various resources of power, and multiple identities (sectarian and nonsectarian) in the negotiation process, thus creating fluid rather than fixed identities.

Both the old and the new users of space have had to develop new strategies to access to services and resources. This has encouraged the emergence of both temporary and long-term interest groups to negotiate with the postwar stakeholders. Unlike the wartime alliances were mostly based on sectarian affiliations, postwar groups are not necessarily sectarian. For example, residents of a specific building might work together to receive phone services or to switch their electricity supply to a stronger line. Sometimes tenants in a certain building form a group to ask the landlord to fix the stairs or change the water pipes. Property owners work together to evict the displaced and prewar tenants from their properties.

In the postwar period, a number of the prewar property owners returned to Ayn al-Mreisi to reclaim their properties. Upper-class families are buying apartments in the newly constructed buildings, and regional and international businesses, such as hotels, airline companies and banks, are moving into the neighborhood.

The neighborhood is undergoing what I name a "post-war state of emergency" or as many Beirutis say "lets wait and see." This state of emergency is shaping the relationship

between individuals, institutions, residents of the city and the spaces they occupy and use. Relations among neighbors who belong to various political, ethnic and religious groups, family members, men and women, the young and the old are all changing.

### **Tenants and Landlords**

Property owners of Ayn al-Mreisi are serving notices to longstanding tenants who have lived in their apartments from before the war and who are currently paying very low rents. Negotiation takes place between the tenants and landlords, with the former attempting to obtain higher compensation for leaving. The tenants are hoping to succeed because owners cannot sell their property for a good price if it is still leased to prewar tenants for low rents. A widespread informal agreement is that tenants receive a compensation *Khliw* of about half of the estimated price of the property they are leasing in return for vacating it. For example, if the price of an apartment is estimated at 100,000 American dollars, the prewar tenant is usually given the right to purchase the apartment for \$50,000, or receive \$ 40,000 as a *khliw*, the fee for vacating the disputed property.

The following case demonstrates the complex relationships between property owners and their prewar tenants. Nabil, a Sunni Muslim born in 1962 in a three-bedroom apartment in Ayn al-Mreisi, provides an example of one such negotiation. His family rented the apartment in 1960 from its Lebanese owner and then from its Syrian owner after the building was sold in 1982. Similar to other prewar tenants, the rent Nabil's family pays now is very low, less than \$100 a year<sup>38</sup>. The owner now wants to sell his property to an investor who plans to demolish the building and construct a hotel in its place. The investor has offered to pay US \$3 million for the building after the tenants are evacuated.

Nabil's negotiations with the owner began in 1995. The Syrian owner has offered to pay Nabil \$30,000 but he refused the offer, and asked for \$60,000. The landlord's lawyer is currently offering to pay him \$40,000. Nabil said:

...the last time the lawyer came to me I told him I would buy the apartment for \$40,000. Although I do not have any money to pay for the apartment, I know the

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<sup>38</sup> Similar apartments in the area are rented for \$400-500 a month.

owner is planning on selling the building. No one will buy it from him with prewar tenants like myself still living in it. I am offering to buy the apartment for US\$ 40,000, or they pay me US\$ 60,000. It is a way to make the landlord pay me \$50,000. I know if I wait he will give up and pay me the \$50,000.

Nabil is not currently employed. During the war he was a fighter for various war militias. With the money he receives from the building owner, Nabil plans to make a first payment on an apartment in a relatively cheap area in Beirut's suburbs. With the rest he intends to start a small business. As Nabil waits his life is on hold.

Usually negotiations between owners and tenants are highly politicized and take a long time as both employ a variety of negotiation tactics. Lawyers are hired to facilitate agreements, as demonstrated in the case of Nabil. Tenants living in the same buildings might form interest groups and committees to share the costs of a lawyer and try to negotiate for either keeping the place, or gaining higher compensation (*khliw*). In some cases, the parties threaten each other with the force of political parties or militias.

Property owners also have a number of tactics to pressure the tenants. They can refuse to receive rent from

their prewar tenants in order to gain legal rights to expel the tenant. They often stop providing services or maintenance to the building to indirectly force the tenants to leave. Finally, property owners might use threats of violence to evict tenants.

This state of uncertainty and unpredictability which tenants and property owners are experience transforms power relations and calls into question the accountability of governmental institutions, the validity of the traditional sectarian leadership and questions kinship relations and social networks.

The unpredictability of the future and the state of "lets wait and see" extend from the fight between landlords and tenants to within the single household. Each family member has a separate plan for using spaces and properties they are occupying or for using the anticipated compensation. Unmarried sons, for example, want the money to pay for their marriage expenses. Unemployed sons hope to receive money to start private businesses. Mothers want to buy or rent apartments in areas where they have friends and relatives. Older family members want to stay in the same apartment and refuse to leave the neighborhoods with which

they are familiar and the places they are attached to. Daughters, meanwhile, are pressured to give their shares to their brothers, regardless of their own interest. As one mother explained:

I lived in this same apartment for the last 30 years. My son Jihad, his wife and two children live in one room in the same apartment. My unemployed son, Ziad, and my disabled father share another room. . . I did not want to sell my apartment, but my neighbors on the second floor sold theirs and moved back to their village in the mountains. My two sons put pressure on me to sell. With the money that we got, we paid the first installment for two apartments in the Southern suburbs of Beirut. My son Jihad and his family will live in one apartment, and the rest of us will live in the second. We kept the rest of the money for Ziad, to buy a taxi.

In this case, Um Jihad had to follow the desires of her two sons. Umm Jihad herself would have preferred to stay in the same neighborhood where she lived since her marriage 45 years ago, so that she could stay close to her married sister, brother lifetime neighbors. Um Jihad's attachment to her house and the neighborhood were compromised for the desires and needs of her two sons.

It took the family of Um Jihad more than six months to reach this decision, but not all the family members are content about the final compromise. Umm Jihad's married daughter does not talk to her two brothers because they did not give her any of the compensation money. The conflict over the future places of residence and the plans for the compensation money affected the intimate relationships among family members. These examples indicate that negotiations and conflicts are not limited to those individuals and groups belonging to competing sectarian groups. The conflict between interests is stretching to involve members of the same family and household.

The competition over space and the negotiation for compensation motivated the emergence of new forms of alliances and groups in order to satisfy both long and short term needs. Some of these groups invoked sectarian and ethnic affiliation to create a sense of togetherness but others used short-term and/or long-term interests of its members to create alliances. These alliances are used as tactics in the negotiation process.

In Ayn al-Mreisi there are many groups that are based on sectarian affiliation, but this is not the only motive

bringing individuals together. For example groups might revolve around satisfying a temporary needs of people who live in the same building, a professional group in which the members earn their livelihood from the same source, such as the fishermen, or a group whose members are working together to find alternative housing, the displaced. In these cases the sense of belonging to space and the fear of loosing it proved to be strong factors in bringing people together in one group.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The reconstruction project has shaped the social, economic and political networks. During the war the social and economic networks were sectarian. Although the literature tends to stress these sectarian divisions, to understand the period after the war, it is necessary to look at groups that are not necessarily sectarian. The reconstruction project also caused the emergence of a number of "interest groups" that are organized around other issues besides religion and sectarian affiliation. These interest groups are both temporary and permanent and oriented toward a short-term or long-term need.

## Chapter Four

### Beirut is Ours not Theirs:

#### Interest Groups and Power Structures in Ayn al-Mreisi

The previous chapter depicted postwar instability, and the perpetual changes in the physical landscapes and in social and economic relations among the users of space in one Beirut neighborhood, Ayn al-Mreisi. These dramatic transformations, in turn, affected the ways residents of the neighborhood conducted their daily lives, managed their socio-economic networks. The previous chapter discussed a number of responses to this transitional and liminal

situation. Residents of the city formed temporary "interest groups" or short-term alliances such as the case of the tenants who formed temporary non-sectarian alliances to deal with the landlords' and investors' attempts to evict them from their homes, shops and neighborhoods.

In response to the pressure from landlords, investors and developers, residents develop strategies to maintain their prewar and wartime homes or to find alternatives. One of these strategies is forming long-term alliances in order to guarantee their presence in the neighborhood and to negotiate for space with the dominant powers in the area.

This chapter portrays the powerful actors in Ayn al-Mreisi (Solidere, The Municipality of Beirut, political parties, and developers and investors), and their methods and means to control and shape the area. The second part of the chapter portrays the strategies and means deployed by the less powerful groups in the neighborhood and the ways they claim urban rights and privileges, such as the Association for Protecting the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi, the Fishermen, the mosque's committee, and Beirut's Theatre. Members of these groups rely on collective pasts and shared memories as tools to legitimize their claims.

### **Major Power Structures in Ayn al-Mreisi**

Postwar power structures changed after the war. As presented in earlier chapters, the influential actors in the postwar era include many of the wartime militias and political groups as well as, the newly formed governmental institutions, and regional and international investors and developers.

Generally speaking, there are three major blocs of interest and power in Ayn al-Mreisi. One is made of the political parties, which have evolved out of sects and militias during the war. Its membership is based on religious and ideological affiliation. Second are the governmental institutions, such as the Municipality of Beirut. Third, Solidere, the reconstruction company in charge of rebuilding downtown area. Fourth, are the financial forces, which include regional, international investors and developers. There is an overlap in responsibilities and membership across these three. On the other side stand the regular people or "daily practitioners" of the city with less access to power (institutional and economic) who are trying to negotiate a

place in the postwar power hierarchies. Through the formation of both temporary and permanent "interest groups." I examine the interaction between these interest groups and the power brokers—the political parties, financial agents, and government institutions.

While the government is trying to reactivate its institutions and resume its responsibilities after two decades of absence, wartime actors (political parties, traditional leadership, wartime militia) in addition to postwar stakeholders (regional and international developers and investors) are competing to assume new roles by finding themselves a position on the map of the postwar hierarchy in the reconstruction era. Prewar parties continuously modify their political projects, priorities and strategies to accommodate the postwar context and realities. For example, The Amal Movement and Hizballah (God's Party)-- two political parties who demonstrated power and authority in the neighborhood during the war-- tried alternative means. In an attempt to continue recruiting followers and legitimize their presence in the area, Amal Movement and Hizballah Party continued to provide area residents with services and/or interfered in the negotiation process with

property owners, investors and state institutions on behalf of their followers. These processes resulted in an overlap in the assumed responsibilities of public/private, regional/international, and local/global actors. This confusion of responsibility drives people to secure new means and strategies to access information, and negotiate their rights to city spaces, and services.

**Solidere:** The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of the Beirut Central District is a joint-stock company established in May 1994 based on Law # 117 which regulates real estate companies, the objective is to reconstruct the war-damaged areas in accordance with an officially approved master plan. Solidere aims to "revive the historic heart of Beirut as a regional financial, commercial and tourist center" (Solidere 1996: 1). As illustrated in chapter two, Solidere's activities are supposedly limited to rebuilding Beirut's Central District, but the residents of Ayn al-Mreisi and other adjacent neighborhoods anticipate that the project's area will expand from the city center westward to their neighborhood. For example, Solidere has already confiscated land in Ayn

al-Mreisi to build highways and a 3.6-Km ring road connecting the downtown area with the airport. Owners whose property was appropriated for the ring road had to negotiate with Solidere for compensation. This is primarily accomplished through seeking support from other stakeholders and actors. Although Solidere claims that its "massive and global reconstruction of the war-torn city center was seen as a must-do action to announce the end of war and the beginning of return to normality" (Kabbani 1996:8) its responsibilities towards the people affected by its operations are not clearly defined. For example, Solidere paid compensation to the property owners whose land was confiscated for the ring road only, but state agencies such as The Municipality of Beirut, the Lebanese Ministry of Public Works and the Central Fund for the Displaced are responsible for handling many of public works and the complaints submitted by affected citizens. From the residents' point of view, it is not clear with whom and in what way they should negotiate and on what basis. In addition, to appropriating property in the area, Solidere's project caused real-estate values to sky-rocket.

Similar to other neighborhoods close to Beirut's Central District, the adjacent location of Ayn al-Mreisi in relation to the downtown area, the value of land and property have tripled since the beginning of Solidere's project. The changes in the value of property changed the relationships to space in the neighborhood. Residents of the area are undergoing a state of uncertainty and unpredictability in regard to settling on future plans for spaces they are currently occupying and using.

**The Municipalit(ies) of Beirut:** During the war, the building that hosted the Municipality located in the downtown area was abandoned. Two temporary municipalities were created, one in the Christian East side and the other in the Muslim West Side of the city. During the war the two municipalities provided minimum services and were closed much of the time. At the time of my research, the Municipality continued to operate from its two wartime rental buildings. The two locations were run by one "President of the Municipality" *rais al -baladeyya* who divided his time between the two locations. It was planned that the workers in the two locations would move to the

Municipality's renovated permanent location in the downtown area.

In the postwar era the Municipality is also restructuring itself and trying to reclaim its rights and responsibilities. This is proving difficult, however, because of its inability to provide services. People have not paid taxes and fees for the past 20 years, thus the Municipality has few resources to draw upon. Gradually the Municipality tries to encourage residents of the city to pay their accumulated debts. For example, the Municipality refuses to issue documents such as birth certificates, death certificates or personal identification to those who have not paid their past-due debts. In addition, the Municipality granted a two month period to property owners to obtain a license after paying all late taxes and fines to the city to legalize unlicensed buildings constructed during the war and other 'war illegalities' such as added floors and balconies that violate urban regulations. The Municipality also has begun to confiscate property in order to rehabilitate some of the infrastructure and it is trying to enforce the urban planning legislation on newly constructed properties. However, the Municipality's

resources are limited because it is still unable to enforce its urban planning codes, and collect its past due fees from the city's inhabitants.

This makes the city residents view the Municipality as an unreliable institution, one which cannot be held accountable or discharge responsibilities. Consequently, people seek alternative service providers such as those connected to the main political parties in the area.

**The Amal Movement:** Amal is one such party, having risen to prominence in the Shiite community during the 1980s (Nortorn 19--). During the war, Amal's militia controlled various neighborhoods throughout Beirut. In the late 1980s Amal was one of the major service providers in Ayn al-Mreisi. It had generators distributing electricity, it provided drinking water, operated a health clinic, and managed to house many of the Shiite war displaced. After the war ended, Amal faced the loss of some of the control and influence it enjoyed, since there was no longer a need for its wartime services. Amal is now trying to retain power through empowering the Shiite community in the neighborhood and defending their rights by playing the

role of intermediary and negotiating on their behalf with the Central Fund for the Displaced, Solidere, and with the property owners.

The majority of the Amal Movement's followers in Ayn al-Mreisi are displaced Shiites. However, those Shiites who lived in the neighborhood before the war also support the movement. The current leader of Amal in the neighborhood is a prewar Shiite resident of Ayn al-Mreisi.

Amal enjoys popularity among the war-displaced Shiites who are generally looked down upon and are accused by the non-displaced of downgrading the neighborhood. Amal is building housing projects for its displaced followers in the southern suburb of Beirut, and providing alternative affordable housing within the borders of the city. On many occasions, Amal also extends its services to include non-Shiites of Ayn al-Mreisi. When the Israelis bombed the main electricity generators of Beirut in 1996, for example, Amal temporarily provided electricity for many of the area residents through generators privately owned by its members.

**Investors and Developers:** Due to Ayn al-Mreisi's location next to the city center and the Mediterranean coast, land prices have already tripled in the two years immediately following the war (Tabet 1993). Old residential buildings are being demolished and replaced with huge, modern towers for high-income residents in the Gulf countries, businesses and offices. More than 200 companies from Western and Arab countries are taking part in rebuilding Beirut (Beyhum et. al. 1992). Regional investors, mostly from the Arab Gulf countries and international Lebanese investors from the diaspora have purchased land in Ayn al-Mreisi to start various businesses, ranging from chain restaurants, international hotels and entertainment facilities. In December of 1996, the Hard Rock Cafe celebrated its opening in the presence of Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri and a number of businessmen.

The prices of the apartments and offices built by these investors are beyond what the original residents of Ayn al-Mreisi can afford and are rumored to reach several million dollars. Postwar investors' and developers' plans, such as the Hard Rock Cafe are prohibiting many city dwellers from their familiar urban spaces by designing

spatial arrangements which satisfy the needs for new users and ignore the emerging needs of the original users of space.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the confrontation between local residents and capitalist planning schemes is centered in the usage and meanings of space. The initiatives of the investors and developers are forcing many of the original area residents to sell their property and move out. Those who stay become strangers within their own neighborhoods.

### **Beirut Is Ours Not Theirs: Long-term Interest Groups**

As a response to the divergent attempts of the powerful actors described earlier, prewar and wartime users of space develop strategies through which they hope to keep the spaces they occupy, or negotiate to receive higher compensation should they be forced out of spaces they occupy. In what follows I describe four examples of groups formed after the war in Ayn al-Mreisi. They include individuals from different sectarian backgrounds and political affiliations who share one or more common

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39 I will discuss the case of the Hard Rock Café later in this chapter.

interest. Some of these groups extended their activities to include members from other parts of the city.

Members of these long-term groups often offer various narratives of their prewar and wartime spatial experiences and their survival strategies in order to prove their rights to the contested spaces within the neighborhood. In these narratives speakers highlight their presence in the area for long periods of time, which legitimizes their claims to spaces in the area. In these narratives, speakers stress and emphasize their non-sectarian belonging, and occasionally criticize and denounce sectarianism.

#### **The Sea Is God's Property: The Fishermen**

I worked closely with fishermen of Ayn al-Mreisi. They are mainly Druze and Sunni Muslims, and are considered among the poor of Ayn al-Mreisi because they do not legally own any property in the area. Until 1994 approximately 50 fishing boats existed in Ayn al-Mreisi port. Three or four fishermen worked on each boat; thus 150-200 families depended on the port for their living.

The fishermen of Ayn al-Mreisi are negotiating with investors who bought the land adjacent to the seashore to

preserve their old fishing port, the only one remaining in West Beirut. During the 1960s and 1970s, the size of the port declined due to a number of developmental projects sponsored by both the city and the private sector --land was confiscated and bought by private investors, and developers. In the 1970s the Municipality of Beirut planned a coastal highway to connect downtown Beirut to southern Lebanon. Among the confiscated properties was the fishing port.

When the highway was being built in 1974 the Lebanese Worker's Union supported the Lebanese Union of Fishermen in their negotiations with the Municipality and other governmental agencies. At that time the unions were strong enough to negotiate for the rights of their members. Moreover, the Chief Rayyes of the fishermen in Ayn al-Mreisi was the head of the Union of Fishermen in Beirut. During the war, the fishermen's union stopped functioning, however, and remains closed today. The fishermen blocked the city's machines for days and halted the work on the highway for six months. The Lebanese Fishermen's Union with the support of local businesses in the area negotiated with the Municipality of Beirut, an agreement was reached to

build a bridge and maintain an entrance to the sea for the fishermen instead of closing the port. According to this compromise, the size of the fishing port was reduced and the families of the fishermen, who had been living in small rooms next to the sea, were forced to move to other areas in Ayn al-Mreisi.

During the war, the fishing port was illegally purchased from the Municipality by two investors (a Lebanese and a Syrian) who are building a 30-floor luxury apartment building called *Al-Ahlam* (The Building of Dreams). The apartment building will have immediate entrance to the sea through what was once the fishing port. Consequently, the fishermen are holding meetings to discuss strategies for contesting the plan and to retain their rights to the port. They are developing various strategies, ranging from forming alliances with sectarian associations and powerful individuals in the area to contacting parliament members, influential politicians, and the media.

The fishermen argue that the port was illegally sold to the owners of the *Al-Ahlam* building since it is *amlak bahreyya* (sea property). The fishermen deem sea property the property of God, which means no one can buy or sell it,

including the Municipality itself. The fishermen accuse the two owners of bribing municipal officials during the war in order to buy the port area. According to the fishermen, the owners of the Al-Ahlam building are violating the Municipality's laws by buying God's property and taking over the rights of the fishermen to their source of income. However the fishermen do not know where to go to protest officially. Before the war, the fishing port was under the control of the Ministry of Agriculture. During the war it became part of the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Tourism. Now nobody knows exactly who is responsible for the port.

The fishermen use their contacts and memberships in various groups to find a solution to their problem. The Mosque Committee (Sunni Muslims) and the Association for Protecting the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi (Druze) supported the fishermen, and tried to place pressure on parliamentary candidates in September 1996 to exchange their votes for promises to find an alternative fishing port. Immediately after the elections, with the intervention of a parliament member, the Municipality of Beirut offered to build an alternative fishing port in a different area away from the

Al-Ahlam building. The new port, though in a different location, will retain the name Ayn al-Mreisi Fishing Port. The new port will be for all the fishermen in Beirut. The Ayn al-Mreisi fishermen refused this solution, arguing that the port wont be enough for all the fishermen of Beirut, and the proposed area is not a good for fishing. As it is located on open sea, the lack of protection exposes their equipment to damage.

The fishermen agreed among themselves to choose Abu Adnan Al-Sayyad<sup>40</sup>, as their spokesman. Abu Adnan is the Rayyes in the port. Before the war he was the leader of the Lebanese Fishermen's Union and is one of the oldest and most experienced fisherman in Ayn al-Mreisi. The fishermen respect his knowledge and admire his efforts to work for the good of all the fishermen and the neighborhood. Moreover, he has the time and fewer responsibilities than other fishermen, as he has neither a wife nor children to support. Usually he sits every day from 10 am until one in the morning in front of his room next to the port. For the

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<sup>40</sup> I did not change the name of Abu Adnan since he is the only chief of the fishermen in Ayn al-Mreisi. Also he wanted me to use his real name, hoping that this will help in making his voice heard.

fishermen the idle port becomes a social space where the original people of the area meet, not only the fishermen. Abu Adnan has lived in the area for 50 years and is trying to write a book about fishing in the Ayn al-Mreisi port -he describes the fishing techniques from a historical perspective in order to document one aspect of the area's heritage. Fishermen and their supporters come on a regular basis to visit Abu Adnan. The men sit next to the fishing port playing cards, smoking argila (water-pipe) and drinking coffee.

One afternoon, while Abu Adnan was playing cards with his friends from the neighborhood in the shade of the Building of the Dreams, Abdu (a fisherman) came and happily informed Abu Adnan that the Al-Ahlam Building is sinking into the sea. The men sipped their coffee, stared at the building and looked back at Abdu asking him for more details. He informed them he heard the building sank five centimeters into the water as a result of an engineering error. One of the men said: "Do you think God is asleep? He is watching!" and the men started a new game.

In their negotiation for the right to the port, the fishermen claim place attachment, not only to the land of

Ayn al-Mreisi, but also to the sea facing it. Abu Adnan does not possess the official documents to prove his place attachment, but he is using his recognized knowledge of fishing and the sea as proof of rootedness to the area. Abu Adnan demonstrates his knowledge of the sea through what he describes as *tadaris al-baher* (seascapes) he compares them with landscapes. He said that although he lived in the area his entire life, his knowledge of the surrounding streets and neighborhoods is less than his knowledge of the sea. He claims that for the fisherman, the sea is home and land is a temporary place. For the fisherman the attachment is to sea and not to land, and he highlighted this by saying the fishermen of Ayn al-Mreisi face the sea and give their backs to Beirut. Abu Adnan and the other fishermen define the "real Beiruti person" as the one who knows how to swim and to catch fish. Accordingly, those who came to the city from the mountains such as the Shiites and the Maronites are not "real Beirutis."

Another strategy Abu Adnan employs to prove his attachment to the fishing port is refusing to move out of the malfunctioning fishing port. Although he is not able to make a living by catching fish, he spends all of his time

sitting there. Now he decided to document his experiences in a book and talks to anyone who is willing listen to the story of the fishermen of Ayn al-Mreisi. He told the story to journalists, parliament candidates and anthropologists. Abu Adnan tried to contact reporters and journalists to advocate on behalf of the fishermen with very little success. When Abu Adnan speaks on behalf of the fishermen, he presents the Ayn al-Mreisi fishing port as part of the threatened heritage of Beirut needing preservation. He supports his argument by stating that members of the Association for protecting the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi and members of the Mosque Committee agree the fishing port is part of the area's heritage.

Recently a group of 15, younger fishermen split from the larger group hoping they would find work at the port as drivers of the luxury boat belonging to the building's future wealthy tenants. The older fishermen accuse the younger ones of accepting bribes from the investors, and are viewed as dissenters. Although the older fishermen accused the younger ones for betraying the larger group, they understood the action and explained that the young

fishermen have children to support and they cannot stay without work.

Ayn al-Mreisi fishing port became a site of nostalgia for many local artists. A number of artists tried to preserve the area through art. They drew paintings of the fishing port as part of the fast disappearing city. One such artist, George, showed me his paintings of the port. One of them is the Mediterranean sea at sunset with the rocks laying peacefully in the calm water and two fishing boats sailing in the water. It is interesting that the Corniche and the buildings facing the port were not visible in George's painting. According to George, artists believe Ayn al-Mreisi is what is left of *Beirut Zamman* (Beirut of the past), and those who want to remember the way Beirut used to be should come and visit Ayn al-Mreisi. George believed it is his responsibility to document what was left of Beirut for the future generations. Similar the fishermen, George the painter, looked to the sea and ignored the land with the new buildings. Both of them feel that the new buildings erected by developers and investors are destroying their neighborhood.

Unlike the original residents of the neighborhood who denounce the attempt to change the physical landscape of Ayn al-Mreisi, Future TV which is owned by the Prime Minister Hariri, runs a video clip on a daily basis which states "the country is moving, the work is running, do not worry" with fishermen in a small fishing boat as the background of the clip. Future TV is using the image of Ayn al-Mreisi to convey another meaning. According to the video clip, life in Beirut is going in the era of reconstruction that is led by the Prime Minister Hariri, and every body is content with the reconstruction project both the new comers to the city and the 'authentic' original residents such as the fishermen.

Almost all the people I talked to in Ayn al-Mreisi believe that the fishermen have the fight to the port, and they consider the fishing port as part neighborhood's and city's heritage, they are convinced that the fishermen will not be able to face the threat of the investors who are supported by the government and the Prime Minister.

### **Collecting History and Preserving Space: The Association for the Revival of the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi**

Another community group active in the neighborhood al-Mreisi is the Association for the Revival of the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi. The majority of the Association's members are Druze who distinguish themselves from the Druze of the mountains, and emphasize their identity as Beirutis from Ayn al-Mreisi. Despite the fact that the majority of its members are Druze, the association presents itself a non-sectarian organization for the following reasons. There are non-Druze members, Sunni Muslims and Christians; the association collects and preserves the heritage of everyone in the neighborhood regardless of their sectarian and religious affiliation; and it supports non-Druze residents of the area, such as the fishermen who are a mixture of Sunni and Druze. The Association's understanding of the concept of "heritage" is not particularly clear. Najem, its founder, stated his objective as the preservation of anything old, authentic and used by the people of Ayn al-Mreisi. Residents acknowledge the efforts of the association's founder and refer to him as "He who can tell the history of the neighborhood."

Najem, a retired fireman currently works as a fisherman and a diver, has transformed the second floor of his house into what he calls the "Museum of Ayn al-Mreisi." Najem is collecting old items once used by the areas' inhabitants. Residents donate objects they no longer use but judge to be valuable for the heritage of their neighborhood. The three-room museum holds, among other things: 40 albums of old photographs; a collection of old radio sets, telephones, and phonographs, traditional Beirut clothes, coins from different parts of the world and paintings and postcards of old Beirut.

Najem emphasizes the importance of his museum as a way to preserve the heritage and guarantee the continued existence of the area:

Ayn al-Mreisi is what is left of old Beirut, which is also on its way to disappearing. If you come back to this area in 10 years, I am sure that you won't find any of us here and you won't recognize the area. I am trying to protect the heritage and the memory of this area, because our heritage is our history.

Najem has detailed knowledge of his collection, such as the name of the item's, the year it was purchased its price and the original owner. He

enthusiastically told me the story of an old radio:  
"This radio was the first radio set in Ayn al-Mreisi.  
The owner who is a friend of my father sold his  
carpentry equipment to buy it in the 1930s. The  
neighbors used to go to his shop to listen to the  
radio." Najem tells similar stories about other items  
of his collection. Each of these items is connected to  
a story about the neighborhood or its residents.

Najem's collection is not limited to items  
manufactured or made in the neighborhood. He includes  
anything adopted by the residents over time regardless  
of the item's origin, many of the items in the  
collection represented moments of modernity and not  
authenticity at the time when they were used by the  
neighborhood's inhabitants. Najem's story of the  
carpenter's radio is an example. According to Najem,  
the minute an item is used by the inhabitants of Ayn  
al-Mreisi it becomes part of the neighborhood's  
heritage whether it is an appliance, a coin, clothing  
or fishing equipment. Najem has a large collection of  
photographs as part of his museum. The photos include  
the visits to Ayn al-Mreisi made by numercus

international celebrities such as Hollywood actors and actresses, the Shah of Iran and King Hussein of Jordan, the boxer Mohammed Ali and employees of different embassies. For Najem and the constituency he aims to serve, these photos illustrate a crucial aspect of Ayn al-Mreisi's heritage --namely that Ayn al-Mreisi's beaches, nightclubs, and hotels, attracted many foreign visitors, some of whom formed friendships with local residents. Najem complains about the current comodification of features of the neighborhood's natural environment: "With their money, they [the newcomers] buy beautiful views of the sea, but they do not know the actual meaning of it. They only watch the sea through the glass of their air-conditioned balconies." Najem's criticizes the new residents of the city for not appreciating the unique character of the neighborhood and its authentic past. Through these displays, Najem hopes to document certain moments of the past as a way of providing the area with roots in the present.

A somewhat different strategy has been used by yet another member of this association. From 1950

through the 1980s, Abu Karim operated a sporting club in Ayn al-Mreisi devoted to water sports such as swimming and diving. The owner of the building in which the club was located is replacing it with a large, new apartment building. With the support of the Association for Protecting the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi, Abu Karim successfully negotiated with the owner for space for his sporting club in the basement floor of the new building in lieu of cash compensation. The club is also expected to provide a place to hold meetings and conduct association activities.

The association is supporting the fishermen of Ayn al-Mreisi in their struggles with investors and developers (as discussed earlier in this chapter). The interest in supporting the fishermen was crystallized when members of the association and members of the Mosque's Committee collaborated to organize their votes in the elections to support a specific candidate who promised to find a solution for the fishermen. As explained by members of the association, the support of the fishermen is seen as one way of protecting an

important aspect of the neighborhood's threatened heritage.

### **Whose Lights Will Stay On? The Mosque Committee**

The Ayn al-Mreisi Mosque Committee is one of the oldest community-based organizations. It was established in the 1960s to run an Islamic charity organization in the neighborhood, and expanded its activities to include providing scholarships for local Sunni students to study at the university. Its members are mostly Sunni property owners who consider themselves the original residents of Ayn al-Mreisi and Ras Beirut. Members of the committee claim they ran the schools on voluntary bases, collected aid for the displaced, and coordinated with political authorities to provide services such as water and electricity to local residents during the war. The Mosque Committee also helped reduce tension among various political groups by encouraging them to keep political and ideological conflicts outside the neighborhood and engaging their assistance in maintaining stability in the area. A number of political and ideological

parties existed in Ayn al-Mreisi during the war; such as the Progressive Socialist Party, the Amal movement, Hizballah, the Murabitoun, and the Communist Party. These parties controlled local space and recruited residents but at the same time were sponsored and supported by a variety of outside sources, including the Soviet Union, Iran, Syria, Libya, and the PLO. The Mosque Committee negotiated with members of the different parties to ensure the daily safety of the neighborhood and to protect the area from outsiders' interference in the absence of a central government. Abu-Yousef, a member of the committee, described residents' loyalty to the neighborhood during the civil war: "We, as people of the area, had an unspoken agreement to leave our ideologies and political affiliations on the stairs leading to Ayn al-Mreisi. The minute you are here, you are only the son of Ayn al-Mreisi, nothing else."

After the war, the pre-war committee members reactivated it and incorporated young members. Presently the committee carries out different activities such as encouraging its members to keep their property and to seek

out Sunni investors as business partners to avoid selling their property to "outsiders." Young members of this committee plan to open a public library in the area and are now contacting persons to facilitate it. Since many of its members own property in Ayn al-Mreisi, Sunni tenants who are facing problems with their landlords, and are also members of the mosque's committee, solve their disputes with the intervention of other committee members. For example, a tenant might ask a member of the committee to interfere on the tenant's behalf with another committee member who might be the property owner to renew lease agreement. The property owner finds himself under social and moral pressure from members of the committee to renew a lease for a poor tenant and give up economic gains.

The Mosque Committee also faces the challenge of negotiating with the increasing number of businesses and investors moving into Ayn al-Mreisi. When the Hard Rock Cafe announced plans to open directly across the street from the Mosque, the Committee tried to prevent it. Members of the Committee relied on a city law which states that any entertainment establishment (i.e. a bar or night club which plays loud music and

serves alcoholic drinks) must be located at least 50 meters from any religious establishment. The committee's appeals failed and in December of 1996, the Hard Rock Cafe opened with a gala event attended by numerous investors and dignitaries, including the Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri. Now each night the Hard Rock Cafe's loud western music competes with the mosque's call to prayer.

A full year after its opening the Hard Rock Cafe has not been integrated into the residents' experience as a familiar space nor has it become part of the vocabulary of the daily life in Ayn al-Mreisi. When they give directions, residents do not refer to the cafe, instead they name an army checkpoint located next to it. As, Hassan, an Ayn al-Mreisi resident explained: "These large entertainment businesses are not built for [the local residents]. They are for the rich and the tourists." Only a few of the area's residents with whom I spoke had visited the cafe. Shadi, one of the few who had, described his visit:

Two weeks after the opening, I went there with my friend. We dressed like the customers of the cafe so the

guard at the door wouldn't stop us. Immediately after we sat down, a waitress who was wearing a skirt this long [pointing to five inches above his knee], came to ask us what we wanted to drink, speaking in English. To aggravate her, I said in Arabic: "Give me a Bloody Mary without alcohol" The waitress repeated in English, "You want two orders of Bloody Mary." The waitress did not come back to us, but a waiter brought us the order. We sat there for 15 minutes and left.

The Hard Rock Cafe is one of the few restaurants in Beirut employing waitresses. So for Shadi it was a new experience to see a woman serving alcohol. Although it is quite evident Shadi's animosity toward the cafe pre-dated his visit, his experience there did little to change his opinion.

In an interview with the cafe's manager, I asked why Ayn al-Mreisi was chosen for the location. The manager explained the selection was based on the recommendations of a feasibility study conducted by an international consulting company. The Lebanese-American manager admitted he had very little knowledge of the area or its inhabitants, nor did he express any

interest in acquiring any since, according to him, the café has nothing to do with the residents of the area. The customers of the Hard Rock Café are mainly rich young Lebanese, foreigners who live in Beirut, and tourists. Even the employees are outsiders, primarily students from the American University.

While the Mosque Committee's formal plea to stop the opening of the Hard Rock Cafe was based on religious and moral grounds, residents also complained that the cafe did not bring any economic gains for the inhabitants. Pre-war entertainment establishments were generally portrayed in a positive light, highlighting their contribution to and integration into the local economy. One resident I spoke with compared the Saint George Hotel and the Hard Rock Cafe as follows:

Most of the waiters and workers at the Saint George Hotel used to be from the sons of Ayn al-Mreisi. The management used to buy the hotel's vegetables and meat from the shops of the area. When the workers walked in the streets of the area, they would say good morning to you, unlike [the employees of] the Hard Rock Cafe. All we've gained [from the Hard Rock Cafe] is that our street is

blocked all night by the cars of the cafe's rich customers!

The objection to the Hard Rock Cafe, and other similar businesses, is not their foreignness, since Ayn al-Mreisi residents are familiar with the potential benefits of foreign investment. Rather, what they find objectionable is that the businesses make little effort to involve area residents. The residents of Ayn al-Mreisi distrust the presence of the Hard Rock Café, although it is a public space but the local residents are prohibited from accessing it.

#### **"We Performed There Too:" The Beirut Theatre**

The Beirut Theatre is one of the city's major theatres. The theatre's building was erected in the early 1950s, it was called the Hilton Cinema. The owner and a friend of his, who was a French playwright transformed the cinema into a theatre in 1965, mainly to present Western plays and musical shows.

During the war all entertainment activities were put on hold, Beirut's theatre was used for political activities. Political parties and militias who controlled

the area, and each used the theatre for their own activities. The Progressive Socialist Party, the Murabitoun, Hizballah and Amal movement ran the theatre at different times during the war. There they held meetings, invited political leaders to deliver political speeches and stored weapons.

During my fieldwork, the theatre was a place where music, film festivals, public lectures and conferences were taking place, the theatre hosted a small art gallery, and it was a meeting place for some of the intellectuals of the city. A number of national, regional and international plays were performed there. Among them were Lebanese plays where the war was the main plot, regional plays from Morocco and Tunisia, the Iranian film festival the Czech ballet, a series of films for supporting the resistance in South Lebanon, and finally a conference to commemorate the works of Edward Said.

When the war ended, a number of artists renovated the theatre and started presenting local and international art shows. Residents of area watched the renovations of the theatre with suspicion. Many of the neighborhood residents I interviewed talked about their memories of the theatre

during the war. Munir a member of the Progressive Socialist Party described his relationship to the Beirut Theatre, he said: "the theatre served as our *masrrah al-malyyat* (war theatre). There, we commemorated our martyrs, held oratorical festivals, meetings and stored weapons." Amal Movement used the theatre for similar purposes as well as to celebrate the annual Ashoura ritual, the most significant Shiite occasion. Shiite residents nostalgically remember when they commemorated Ashoura at the Beirut Theatre. For many, especially women, it was their first time to be in a theatre. Huda, the current director, recalled a conversation with one of the women who lived in the neighborhood. In 1994 four months after the official reopening of the theatre for the public, a woman who lives in Ayn al-Mreisi stopped Huda and told her "she feels so sorry when she looks at this place [the theatre]. It was a sanctified place *taher* when we used it to commemorate Ashoura during the war. Pity, they changed it to a playhouse." Huda told the woman that she works there. The woman asked "what kind of work do you do inside? Are you a dancer? Do dance naked in front of men?"

Huda replied: "me! God forbid, I am just a secretary here." Huda added, "I am not familiar with the people who live in the area. Huda lived in the neighborhood before the war, she disassociates herself from the residents the current residents of the neighborhood. Huda explained here answer to the woman by saying that she did not want to have a bad reputation in the area. She was not sure of the people's response to the reopening of the theatre. Later on Huda was surprised when the woman asked her to find a job at the theatre for her divorced daughter.

The theatre's management said that they are facing the problem of recruiting "good" audience, they complained people did not value "good" local art. "When we do exhibits for artists, regardless of their work, the audience that we got was mainly made up of the family and the friends of the artist. We exhibited good works for great artists, where we did not sell anything, while others who were originally from a certain village and their work was decent they were able to sell most of their work. Each artist had his own "tribe." Although the theatre is targeting an audience different from that of the Hard rock Café, the management of the theatre did not think of the local residents of the

Ayn al-Mreisi as their audience. Many of the people in the neighborhood cannot afford the price of the ticket in the theatre.

As explained by the theatre director, they face the obstacle of encouraging the rich to come to their shows. The director said "when we reopened the Theatre, people thought we were crazy, and some people were betting that we would not survive for more than six months. Few days ago banker who lived in East Beirut asked me, How is the area down there these days? Can we come down there now? Many people, wished the theatre was located somewhere else. For the bourgeoisie (who can afford to buy art) this area is a bad one *msharshaha*. The rich, the targeted audience of the theatre, were reluctant to go the theatre because of its location in a in a poor neighborhood. Huda wanted to prove to the rich that the area was changing; this meant that more affluent residents were moving in.

When I asked one of the workers at the theatre about the relationship between the theatre and the areas inhabitants, he explained the reason that the locals did not attend the theatre's activities by saying: "when people look for entertainment, they'd rather go to an unfamiliar

place, they look for something different from their own surroundings." According to him, middle and lower classes, when they went out, they did not go to a theatre located in their neighborhood. They preferred to have the feeling of being 'strangers' yatagharab. This makes the local residents strangers to many of the postwar public spaces in their neighborhood

### **Concluding Remarks**

The interest groups in Ayn al-Mreisi present different narratives of the past. These narratives are based on including or excluding certain moments of the claimed past. This process of including or excluding implies denying others' claims to rootedness in the area and in the city. In most cases the painful experiences of defending a specific space from the "strangers" is highlighted. Detailed stories about negotiating for keeping spaces are being told. According to these narratives the history of the area is divided into two parts: the pre-war and wartime eras.

In these narratives, the past becomes a site of contradictions and competition, which reflects the complex

political and ideological processes in the production of "history." This brings questions of representation, authenticity and authority in the construction of desired past(s).

The Mosque's Committee and the Association for Protecting the Heritage of Ayn al-Mreisi feel that the interests and existence of their members and supporters in the area are threatened by investors, developers and the displaced. Members of the interest groups are seeking support from these two sectarian associations describe the previous days in Ayn al-Mreisi with nostalgia and bitterness. They refer to Ayn al-Mreisi of the past as a village on the edge of downtown Beirut that never integrated into Beirut, and they express the fear that Ayn al-Mreisi won't be a village any more with the presence of all of these strangers.

In their negotiations, interest groups in the area have developed new strategies and alliances to negotiate for space. One of the strategies is claiming a historical connection to the area, and re-reading the history of the group in relation to the area by highlighting the

historical relation between the area and the sea and the downtown.

Reviewing all the actors and their various confessional, ideological and professional backgrounds, it becomes almost impossible to talk about a "community" in the social sense. What constitutes the community in this case is that they share the same physical space, so in this case we might be able to talk about a spatial community rather than a social one. This spatial community leaves space for the heterogeneous, overlapping and conflicting interest and ideologies.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Recapturing Spaces of the Past Days**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter questions the meaning of "public" and "private" spaces in Beirut through demonstrating how specific spaces that might be considered as "private," such as the home, and others that might be known as "public," such as the street and the café. In Beirut, space was transformed from public to private and vice versa before, during and after the war. Depending on who used it, why,

when and how. Space could be read as private, public, or both, or neither.

Notions of public and private domains continued to be central themes in the body of anthropological literature. Many writings questioned the two concepts and demonstrate how the meaning of "public" and "private" changed over time. Generally speaking, public was used to mean space that is state-related, accessible and of concern to everyone and refers to a common good or shared interest. "Private" referred to the domestic and the personal. Nancy Fraser, the feminist writer noted the complexities of the public/private distinction and called for the complexification rather than simplification of the private and the public both theoretically and practically (1992: 128). In spite of similar writings there are still many rigid definitions associated with certain spaces as private --home, property-- or public -- café, street.

### **Women and the Lack of Control over Public Space**

For the Arab, there is no such thing as an intrusion in public. Public means public (Hall 1966: 156)

Questioning the dichotomy between the private and the public hardly occurred in studies about Middle Eastern communities. With few exceptions, the image of the segregated worlds of males and females had been reproduced by making generalizations about different countries, communities, and cultures of the region. In his recent textbook about the Middle East and Central Asia, Dale Eickelman, cited a number of these studies without questioning these assumptions and stereotypes and indeed emphasizing the segregation of men and women, public and private.

As Lawrence Rosen argues, the possession of such common understandings does not necessarily imply that both sexes will elaborate share assumptions in quite the same way. ... Although his [Rosen's] argument is specific to Morocco, it has strong parallels elsewhere in the Muslim world (Eickelman 1998: 197)

Eickelman agreed with Rosen's assumption about the existence of two completely separate worlds for men and women and he continued to support Rosen's argument providing quotation from the Quran and other teachings of Islam. "Through following God's word, as it is known from

the Quran and the teachings of Islam, a man can avoid being a slave to his passions, can distinguish right from wrong, and can live as God intended him to live. Through discipline and learning, a child gradually learns to control his passions. Women also possess reason but cannot develop it as fully as men" (Eickelman 1998: 197). Authors, Rosen and Eickelman simplified the complexity of the situation and the articulation between women, the private, the domestic, and the inside, on one hand, and men, the public, the political and the outside, on the other hand.

Similar to Eickelman and Rosen, Bourdieu linked the architecture of the traditional Kabyle house to the practical functions associated with each of its sections, and its cultural connotations. He saw the relationships between the house and its residents within dualistic categories (male/female, house/fields, day/night, upper/lower, and right/left) that made the house a microcosm of the "same oppositions which govern all the universe" (Bourdieu 1979). These writings ignored the fact that the authors themselves were "outsiders" to the private, domestic, and women domains that they studied. This might explain the fact that they based their analysis

on information related to public domain, political life, and market through their male informants and then constructed their generalization about "both worlds" assuming that women's world was unavailable and isolated. "Women may only exist in the private domain, in socially closed space. They have no public and open life." (Gilsenan 1982: 172)

The literature on the Middle East ascertained the divided world between male/female and public/private where men were viewed as dominant, powerful, political and controlling the public sphere, while women were viewed as subordinate, non-political and confined to the private domestic space. Some studies about the private domain recognized the existence of women's power but as implicit and indirect in influencing the public.

Women were presented as the inhabitants of the private sphere and of limited significance.<sup>42</sup> Later studies traced the changes of women's roles focusing on the informal roles of women, who, within the extended family, engaged in politics as fully as men but in a "deniable" way not

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<sup>42</sup> Roxann (1976) and Abu-Lughod (1998)

amenable to official control or public scrutiny. (Eickelman 1998: 182-183)

### **Beirut Space is Neither Public nor Private it is Prohibited**

Unlike these portrayals of the private and the public realms in the Middle East. In Beirut, women provided interesting and complex images and descriptions of vibrant accessible and articulate spaces and public life, based on their pre-war and wartime experiences.

In what follows, I will describe and analyze the changes in the control of women over "public" and "private" spaces in Beirut that made such sites neither public nor private. Based on interviews with women from different backgrounds and based on women's published memoirs of the war, it is evident that many changes took place in the meanings, frequency and usage of space during the various period of war. The mythical remembering was not only a male preserve. In their descriptions and interpretations of their prewar experiences, Beirut educated women also portrayed a sophisticated, vibrant urban setting. Many of the educated women I interviewed romanticized the situation of women in both prewar, and wartime Beirut through

nostalgic narratives on the availability of public spaces for women, such as cafes, funeral homes, beaches and streets. The memories and narratives of the above mentioned women revolved around certain sites of "freedom." They emphasized their experiences of crossing social, familial and religious borders in their attempts to set up places for themselves in the public life of the prewar city. Ilham --a professor at the Lebanese University, a previous political activist, and now running an NGO for women-- compared her daily life in the 1960s and 1970s to the lives of her mother's generation. "Before the sixties, women's spatial movement was restricted to the traditional spaces in the city such as going to the hair dresser, the tailor, the shops of the neighborhood, or taking the children to school and visiting neighbors and relatives. Few women worked outside the home. In the sixties women started to be more visible in public spaces - without necessarily being accompanied with men--. Ilham did not see, that proper women were still prohibited from a number of "public spaces" - for example, the red light district at night, which was exclusively for men and prostitutes, or *ai-artistat* (public women).

The civil war transformed the use of space in Beirut dramatically. The city was divided into West and East Beirut, with the "green line" dividing Beirut into two cities. Many of those who lived in one part of the city never crossed to the other part through the sixteen years of war. Both sections of Beirut (East and West) and the city as a whole did not fit into the assumed dichotomy of the public/private. The Western part of wartime Beirut was private for those who stayed or moved there -legal tenants, property owners and the displaced population who came from East Beirut. At the same time, West Beirut became an unfamiliar zone, and not accessible space for most of those who lived in East Beirut with militias controlling the checkpoints preventing residents from freely crossing from one part of the city to the other. Applying Mary Douglas's call for looking with suspicion on anyone who declared that there were two kinds of people, or two kinds of reality or process (Douglas 1978). In this case the part of Beirut city where residents were not allowed to enter was neither public nor private, it was a prohibited space with various layers of accessibility and prohibition.

Although the city was divided into east and west with a clear demarcation line, some of the residents of the city challenged the new war reality and risked their lives by crossing from one side to the other. Unlike many Christians who left their places of residence in West Beirut and moved to the eastside of the city, Shireen decided to stay in her home which was close to her job. She said:

I am Christian, I had friends and relatives on the other side [East Beirut]. I wanted to keep my relationship with them alive. I did not want to accept the fact that anybody could prohibit me from moving around my city. Crossing militia-controlled checkpoints was a trip of suffering and danger. I used to drive to the other side whenever I managed to get gas, the trip took 3-4 hours. It was a challenging experience, you would never know when the bombing and shooting would start. The most terrifying moment on the checkpoint was when the shooting started between the fighting militias while waiting on line to cross ... you couldn't move forward or backward.

Shireen, an educated middle class woman maintained access to the whole city, but she had to go through the checkpoints that did not exist in the pre-war period. Shireen was trying to prove that the city as a whole stayed as a "public space" to which she could have entry to by

challenging both the war and the militiamen. She was willing to risk her own life for that. Crossing from one side of the city to the other was not part of the daily experiences of the majority of the residents of Beirut, since most residents accepted the war reality of the divided city.

Shireen's story demonstrated that the struggle over space was not limited to that between the different militias or sectarian groups but expanded to include gender and age groups who continued to struggle over accessing public space in wartime Beirut. How space should be used and organized and the role of these struggles in maintaining power structures in the larger community became issues worth exploring. Shireen tried to explain the reasons that made militiamen allowed women to cross the checkpoints by saying:

It was easier for women to cross-checkpoints. We [women] became the connections or the mediums between the two parts of the city. The militiamen never prohibited me from crossing, they might respected me as a woman, or my white hair made them see me as their mother.

Women proved that they could challenge the war and survived its danger. Another woman said "Before the war, if we stayed late at night at someone's home, men would walk us back home. During the war we walked them to their homes." Shireen was not sure why it was easier for women to cross the checkpoint, i.e. having access to public space more than men. It was evident that women had access to public spaces more than non-militia men did, and more than what they had before the war. Since women were not viewed as part of the fighting militias, they were able to enter a number of "prohibited spaces." When women crossed from one side of the city to the other despite the dangers associated with crossing, they were not visible to the militiamen because they were not viewed as a threat to the power structure among the fighting militias. Furthermore, women were able to access new prohibited space -walking in the streets at night, and accessing the other part of the city-. Before the war, women were not able to walk in the street late at night without being accompanied with a male "protector." This meant that because they were "visible" they needed a protector.

During the war non-militia men needed women to enable them to access the streets of the city at night. It was considered safer for a man to be accompanied by a woman. This made him harmless and most likely invisible for the militiamen, non-militiamen escorted women were seen outside the competing power structures of the war. In this case women became the protectors of men, and their means to access wartime public spaces. Women such as Shireen believed that "there was an unspoken agreement among the different militias not to attack women." Interestingly, although women enabled men to access the streets during the war. Men I talked to never mentioned the experience of being escorted by women, when I asked about it, many ignored the question or commented by saying "this was not important," and others changed the topic and talked about "more important" things.

Unlike the educated "westernized" women who enjoyed Beirut's public scene before and during the war, older women who were referred to by the educated women as "less modern" and "traditional" often told their own stories about urban public spaces before and during the war. These narratives demonstrated that "traditional" women accessed a

number of public spaces that were temporarily designated for women and children at different times.

"Arba'at Ayoub" was a Beiruti tradition where residents of the city celebrated the beginning of spring on the last Wednesday of April each year. According to Itani (1996), this was an old Beiruti ritual to commemorate the patience of the Prophet Ayoub, who overcame misery and hardship after loosing his wealth, wife and children when he had smallpox and abandoned by his people. He wandered on the edge of the city and prayed to God. On the last Wednesday of April, a spring of water spurted under his feet where he bathed and drank from that spring and cured from his disease. Beirutis, for generations celebrated this day by going out for a picnic on the beach. (Itani 1996: 38-40).

Women used to prepare *mfata'a* a special meal for the picnic, it consists of rice, tahini sauce, sugar, saffron, and nuts. Women went to the beach and build *irzzal* a canopy and children played with kites. In the afternoon,

before darkness, the men protected the beach from strangers to let the women swim<sup>12</sup>.

Al-Ramlat al-Bayda, the area where Arb'at Ayoub was traditionally celebrated became an upper class residential area, where most of the beaches were sold to investors and developers who catered for tourists. It was no longer available for traditional Beiruti women picnics. Many of the women I talked to who took part in the Arba'at Ayoub ritual expressed their regrets that they were no longer able to carry on their ritual. Um Salim said "Every year, on the last Wednesday of April, the city would become empty, everybody was out for the picnic. Women who were neighbors or family members and their children went together, ate, danced, played, and swam."

Um Salim regretted that the celebration of Arb'at Ayoub was forgotten by the postwar generation. She said, it was only she and a few of the "original" women of Beirut continued to remember the anniversary. In 1997 Um Salim celebrated Arba'at Ayoub by taking her grandchildren to a

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<sup>12</sup> *Arba'at Ayoub* which was a traditional Beiruti habit. Women and children used to go to the beach for a picnic. It is a celebration of the beginning of spring. Very few people do it in these days.

restaurant in the mountain. Women like Um Salim lost access to prewar public spaces designated for women. For example, in what they referred to as "the old days" Beiruti women swam in the sea in the early mornings, respectful women could not swim in front of men. Men of the neighborhood knew they were not allowed to the beach while women were swimming. Many women said they lost access to the beach when the city "became more westernized and more strangers lived in their neighborhoods." The new comers did not follow the customary traditions of the neighborhoods. Consequently, "traditional" Beiruti women retreated back to their homes.

### **Beirut as a Public Space for Its Neighbors**

Similar to the educated women, a number of intellectuals viewed prewar Beirut as a public space for the whole region. Beirut was described as the Mediterranean's cosmopolitan center and the Middle East's cultural capital. Niqola Ziadeh, an archaeologist and a historian described Beirut as a cosmopolitan city since the 19th century. He said, when the American University of Beirut was established in 1866, it created a unique

atmosphere for researchers and intellectuals from all over the world. For him Beirut's strategic location on the Mediterranean coast allowed the city to play a major role in the silk trade during the Ottoman times, this made the city a center for commercial exchanges. Beirut's silk was transported to all Europe including the city of Lyon in France. Ziadeh continued to distinguish Beirut from other cities in the region such as Damascus and Amman. He states "a French person can easily live in Beirut but not in Damascus, Beirutis do not treat merchants as foreigners but as sources of income. Beirut is a coastal and a cosmopolitan city, unlike Amman which clean, well planned and beautiful, but it will never make it to become a cosmopolitan city. It is consisted of separate villages. For example, in the month of Ramadan you won't see public festivities in its streets, it is kept inside the houses.. If it cannot become Islamo-politan, how is it going to become cosmopolitan! According to Ziadeh what made such as Beirut a cosmopolitan one was its public and street activities, openness and accepting to strangers. He added "it is easy for anyone to integrate into its fabric and society." Ziadeh, who lived in a number of cities in

Palestine, Jordan, Syria, England and the United States, described his experiences by saying "In 1984 when Palestine was occupied, I was in London finishing my Ph.D. At that point I felt homeless, stateless and jobless... Beirut rescued me and my family when I got a job at the American University of Beirut, where I taught for 24 years."

To prove the cosmopolitan nature of the prewar Beirut, Ziadeh stated that there was an average of 2.5 cultural activities in Ras Beirut area alone during the 1950s and 1960s. These activities ranged from public lectures, concerts, and wok-shops hosted by the American University of Beirut, Spanish Cultural Center, Italian Institute, and German Oriental Institute. Ziadeh was similar to the educated women who described the availability of places for socializing and meeting foreign and cosmopolitan personalities. Ziadeh described Beirut as a "cosmopolitan city" and he attributed this to the fact that the city was open and welcomed outsiders like himself. It was a public space and a refuge for those who were looking for alternative social places such as members of Arab political opposition, artists and writers.

One thing that was romanticized about the prewar spaces of the past was that they were "public," that meant they were open for everybody, meaning that individuals from all religious sects and backgrounds could interact freely.

### **Beirut the Night (*al-Leil*)**

For Ziadeh prewar Beirut was a cosmopolitan center for hosting many cultural activities in the area of Ras Beirut. Many of the men I interviewed remembered other public places in the city, this was what they named Beirut at Night *Beirut al-leil* which meant the entertainment services, restaurants, bars, night clubs and prostitutes that were located in a Zaytouneh and the hotel area close to the city center.

Downtown male customers highlighted the mixing between Lebanese, Arabs, and foreigners. To prove the "cosmopolitan" nature of the prewar city, most of the men I interviewed showed me photos of themselves with well-known and supposedly international personalities, mainly American and French actors, actresses, and singers, as well as political figures. In this context one should ask the following questions: Are Beiruties trying to "localize the

global"<sup>13</sup> by incorporating it into their memories and daily life experiences? or Are they attaching themselves to a global vision of the past, where the "global" traveled to them?

Sika worked as a taxi driver before the war at the hotel area, close to Downtown Beirut. Mona, a friend who introduced me to Sika, described him as "a wild animal who lost it's jungle," she meant he did not have a job and did not have clear plans for the present and the future. Mona considered Sika as "well to do" *mabsoc* both before and during the war, but in the postwar period he did not have a stable source of income. When I asked Sika to set a date and a place for an interview, he told me "if you want me to tell you the stories of the pleasant past days, we should meet outside my house. I cannot talk about my past adventures in front of my wife. This might offend her." Sika came to my apartment accompanied by my friend Mona. He was dressed in a suit on a hot humid summer day and carried a brief case business like.

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<sup>13</sup> James Clifford 1997

With lots of enthusiasm, Sika started by saying "alas Beirut of the past days *āākh̄ ālayki ya Beirut zamman*"<sup>14</sup>. Without waiting for any questions, he started describing the hotels area and downtown Beirut before the war when he worked as a taxi driver. He said "Beirut I mean -al-Zaytoneh area- was a place for foreigners and Arabs who wanted to get drunk and stoned, anything the tourist wanted we -the drivers- got it for them." Sika opened his briefcase and took out a number of photo albums<sup>15</sup>. He pointed to one picture and asked me "do you know who is this man? Without waiting for an answer he commented, "this is the famous American actor Robert Mitchell, and this is myself and these are the drivers I worked with." Sika continued to proudly tell the details of meeting the actor. He said while he was waiting to pick up passengers at the taxi stop *Mawqaf* in front of the Saint Georges Hotel, two drivers informed Sika that Mitchell was at the bar at the

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<sup>14</sup> *Beirut zamman* is used by many to refer to the beautiful happy nice days of the past compared to the ugly present. Usually Beirut zamman is the prewar Beirut for some generation, and for others Beirut zamman is much older. It depends on the age of the speaker.

hotel. Sika had a bet with the other drivers to talk to the actor. He said "I squeezed my way to him and went to the bar and I whispered to him in English "Do you want stuff sir? --meaning hash." He left everybody and came with me. I took him to the Dawra area with two of my other friends. We stayed together from 10:00 p.m. till 4:00 in the morning."

Taxi drivers such as Sika took tourists to for tours to the historic sites inside and outside Beirut. The drivers accompanied the tourists for shopping and promised them to get them good bargains. Taxi drivers arranged with a number of storeowners and restaurants to bring them customers and in return the drivers received a certain commission. According to Sika and other drivers the amount of the commission was publicly known, jewelers gave 10, oriental antiques paid \$15 and carpet stores paid \$20 of the total price to the drivers. In the same bag with his photo albums, Sika kept his old expired passports, he conceitedly showed me his visas to Germany, Greece, Turkey, Austria, Bulgaria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan etc. that he obtained when he worked as a car dealer.

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<sup>45</sup> Photos were clear evidence many of the informants to prove that they had a nice global connections in prewar Beirut.

Sika was similar to many residents of the city who passionately longed for prewar days, spaces, and social networks. Remembering was a way to escape the uncertainty of the present and the unpredictability of the future. Sika complained he was unable to find work in postwar city, and did not have friends and familiar places in the city. He described his present life as empty and the city as a foreign space. He compared the emptiness of his present life to the richness of prewar and wartime period. He described one of his regular summer days in prewar Beirut as follows:

At 10:00 a.m. I come to Ajram Beach, have my coffee and swim with my friends. By 1:00 p.m. we buy fresh fish from the fishermen, cook it in a small kitchen at the beach, drink beer and then take a nap. Around 4:00 p.m. I take a shower, take the car from another driver and go to the taxi stop and start working. I will work till 1-2 a.m., then either go home or go out with friends or tourist till 3-4 a.m. There were days where I did not sleep for days.

Martenaise Street and Zaytouneh area were known the center for nightlife and entertainment. Sika described the area as a site for "life, joy and love" "*shareá al-hayah wa hub wa el-inbisat.*" For Sika people of the night were

different from people of the daytime *alam alil ğir an alam anahar*. During the night, the city was for those who did not live in the area. Bars and nightclubs did not open before 6:00 p.m. "This was when the real life started in the area. At night, you found people who came to have fun, undercover police, tourist police, spies, journalists, politicians, actors, actresses, foreigners, and Arabs and Lebanese."

Sika talked with nostalgia about the past days where he had contacts with tourists, close friends and was able to make "good money." His narrative of a regular summer day, he demonstrated he spent most of his time between a number of public spaces in the city.

Sika lived with his parents whom he described religious and conservative. They did not approve of the way he lived, but they accepted it because this was how he earned his living. Sika said he respected his family and their house, he said "I never came back home drunk." I used to drink in the morning and at work. If I drank at night I won't go home."

Unlike the nighttime users of the street, Sika described the street during daytime as "dead except for

some tourists roaming the shops doing last minute shopping." Local residents of the area did not participate in the nightlife of the street, it was the outsiders who gave liveliness and stamina to the area. Local residents were invisible for nighttime users of the street. For Sika, the prewar city was a cosmopolitan when people traveled to his nightlife from all over the world. The outsiders were bringing liveliness to the street and they were Sika's source of knowledge and income.

### **Remembering Wartime Spaces**

During the war, residents of the city adopted to the war environment by developing new daily spatial practices to accommodate and challenge the temporality of the war, since many of the prewar time social spaces had to be replaced.

One of the characteristics of the wartime spaces was the existence of what I will call "sameness in the daily practices," which meant regardless of socio-economic background, residents shared similar wartime experiences and spaces. For those who stayed in the city, access to both "public" and "private" space was not necessarily conditioned by education or socioeconomic status; on the

contrary, the affordability of space was based on the structures of power and authority, i.e. connection to the militias in control. Here I should note that the militias changed over the time and in many cases the same individual moved from one militia to the other. This was one of the reasons that made many of the spaces in the city temporary sites. Rich and poor, women and men all shared staying at the same shelters, walking the streets, and crossing the checkpoints.

### **The Shelter**

The "shelter" was one among the many public places that were created and used during the war to serve a specific function. Talking to people who experienced the war, they said very few of prewar buildings had a built in shelter. When the war erupted alternative shelters had to be secured. City residents designated the basement floors of the buildings, in cases where there was no available basement, apartments located in the second floor of residential buildings became public for all the residents of the building or any body who might be passing in the street when shelling started. In this situation the most

intimate and private place which was the "home" became a public shelter during moments of danger. The basements of buildings had to be prepared with the collaboration of the residents who intended to use it. It was hard to coordinate the work since many of the residents of these buildings were new comers who were displaced from other areas, and old-time tenants did not know their new neighbors. The challenge in this case was to spend the night with "strangers" in an unfamiliar place under dangerous conditions. These conditions changed the meaning of concepts such as space, place, danger, safety, private, public and gender roles. Many resented spending time at the shelter and stated with pride that they stayed home at moments of danger and "favored to die with dignity in their own apartments."

The transformation in women's wartime responsibilities and their access to public space changed the meaning of women's bodies. As a result of emergency and unpredictable danger, women perceived fashion and daily clothing in a different way. "We did not care much of how we looked, it was more important to put on something functional. Jogging pants and sneakers became the war fashion. We needed to be

ready to run at anytime, or to spend the night with strangers in a basement or at some neighbor's apartment. During the war, our -women's- bodies were not subjects of temptation anymore."

The shift in the control of public space was associated with transformation in family relationships, social networks among community members and relations to urban spaces both public and private. Men lost some of their control over their families and over space both in the city and at home. Women became responsible for organizing and managing the lives of their families, both inside and outside the home and accessed new spaces that were prohibited before. For example, it became known among displaced families that it was easier for the woman to ask the militiamen to find housing for their families, the case would be stronger if the woman had children. Men justified sending women to ask for help from militiamen by saying that they considered it degrading to ask for help from the militiamen. Also, they were afraid that they will be asked to join the militia, and if they refuse they might be killed or kidnapped and this would deprive their families of their "male protectors." When sharing spaces with other

displaced families, it was women's responsibility to arrange how to use space.

Leaving the house to get food, water etc. became the absolute responsibility of women. Men were afraid to leave their houses or the neighborhood, they believed that they were the favorite targets for snipers, although there were many women who were shot by snipers. In addition to the emerging wartime responsibilities, women continued to perform their traditional roles and responsibilities such as cleaning the house, taking care of their children and preparing food for their families.

In the postwar era, the war stopped but a new one started. This time it is the war of fashion between women from different classes and sects. Women demonstrated their social class and political affiliation through the kind of clothing and fashion they adopted. One woman remarked that in the later years of the war as well as in the postwar era, the number of young women who decided to wear the 'Islamic dress' *libas shariee* increased drastically. At the same time, more young women followed the latest western fashion of wearing short skirts and tight clothing. Women who chose to wear the 'Islamic dress' explained it by

stating that the Islamic dress allowed them more access to the public scene in the city. Although they are noticeable as individuals, but they were able to demonstrate their political affiliation and identity by standing as political icons of their groups. For example, women who were members of the Shiite political party, Hizballah wore their hair cover in a way that distinguished them from older generations of both Sunni and Shiite women. In addition members of political groups adopted their own colors for the dress, hair cover, as well as the amount of the body to be covered. Samar described the way young Shiite women were dressed as "veil the Iranian way," implying that the women who adopted the veil did so after being influenced and most probably paid by Iran.

Unlike veiled women who saw the Islamic dress as a source of empowerment that allowed them to participate in public life, many unveiled women viewed the veiling as a form of oppressive patriarchy that men practiced to control women. It was interpreted that since men lost many of their traditional roles and power, they forced women to wear the veil as an attempt to redeem some of the power they lost.

## **From French Café to Funeral Home**

Spaces for drinking coffee in Beirut were perfect examples of the diverse intersection of accessible and prohibited spaces, and the construction of space, time, and identity in public arenas. Coffee drinking in Beirut provided a window onto some of Lebanon's very real postwar dilemmas. Looking at the prewar French-style café, wartime funeral homes, wartime espresso vans, and the continuous postwar search to recapture the flavor of these venues, illustrated the ways gender, class, spatialization, and temporality interact to reproduce the experiences, memories, and longings for certain kinds of public pasts and futures.

In memoirs and interviews, it was striking how many cafes were discussed with great passion. This suggested how much coffee drinking venues became part of the sociopolitical and cultural scene in Beirut, both in the present and in the past. Memories of prewar Beirut typically centered on social relations associated with key public spaces, coffeehouses and cafes<sup>16</sup> were among the most

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Maqha was the traditional coffeehouse that was common in all Middle Eastern cities, while the café - was the westernized café.

prominent. Men and women, upper and lower classes have different memories and narratives of different prewar cafes and coffeehouses.

Generally speaking, the traditional coffeehouse *al-maqha* functioned as a club, and a place for men's entertainment. A recent memoir by Itani, an old Sunni Beirut lawyer, listed three kinds of cafes in Beirut in the "good old days": First, the beach café, that functioned as a meeting site for sailors, merchants and tourists: examples Al-Haj Dawood Café, Al-Ghalayinni café. Second, cafes that were located within the borders of the city center, for those who worked and shopped there. These cafes were business and social meeting points for men who came to Beirut from the countryside. Examples were Al-Qazaz Café, Falasteen Café and Farouq café. Third, the port cafes that were used by the *Rayess* -the chiefs of the fishermen, workers at the port, sailors and lifters. According to Itani, the cafes were categorized according to their location within the city, which determined the kind of customers as well as the activities that took place in the *Maqha*.

*Al maqha* (the traditional coffeehouse) served *argila* (water-pipes), Turkish coffee, tea, "traditional" cold drinks, such as lemonade, *jellab* (a drink made of dates and nuts), liquorice juice and appetizers. Interestingly, in his description of the café scene in Beirut, Itani overlooked one type, the modern French cafes that were located in Ras Beirut area, mainly on Hamra Street. In fact, when I talked to intellectuals -men and women, Lebanese and non-Lebanese- about their pre-war café experiences, most of them only mentioned the modern cafes of Hamra Street. Thus, I would add a fourth type --the French café -- to Itani's list.

During the 50s-60s a number of what were known as "modern cafes" opened in the Ras Beirut area such as The Horseshoe, The Dolcivita, The Modca, and The Express. The names themselves illustrated the desire of having a cosmopolitan nature and identity for the city and its residents. These cafes served "western beverages" such as espresso, instant coffee, tea made from tea bags and western deserts rather than the local beverages and snacks the coffeehouse *maqha* served. Interestingly, the only item that crossed both menus was the "Arabic or Turkish" coffee.

These modern cafes were remembered as sites of socializing, entertainment, and political and intellectual debates. Amina, a painter and political activist, colorfully described the Hamra street cafes as "places for breathing freedom." Going to the café had become the daily routine of Beirut's intellectuals. Educated women like Ilham and Amina, above, started to frequent the modern French Café on daily basis.

Each social group adopted a particular café, and each café in the Hamra Street gained a specific reputation attracting the corresponding clients. For example, the Horseshoe was known as the intellectuals' café, where poets, writers, and artists met. The women who attended this café were, as one of them said, "those who crossed the border of worrying about their reputation -the fear that people will talk negatively about them-." They described themselves as "free women" *nisa'a mutaharirrat* who were able to take complete responsibility for their behavior.

Most of the time the same people sat around the same table or in the same corner of the same café. Mona -- an artist-- described her relationship to one table at the Horseshoe café:

At one point, I felt that that small old table became an extension of my living room. In that spot we discussed each others work [writings and paintings], fought over political issues, read newspapers, borrowed each others books, made new friends and lovers and lost others. If the walls or chairs would ever speak they would be the best ones to tell our life stories.

Although some of the Horseshoe customers did not know each other personally, they knew each other's work. Ilham said "In order to become part of the scene at the Horseshoe you had to get into the discourse of its customers *bidik tudkhuli ila khitabuhum*," that was, one had to more or less speak the same language, politically or otherwise.

Other cafes hosted other gatherings. For example, Dolcevita Café was known as a central place for the political opposition from various Arab countries, and their presence attracted members of the secret intelligence and spies of the different Arab and foreign regimes (Munif (1998) and Amjad Naser (1999)). The permanent crowd at Dolcevita was comprised mostly of men.

The Modca Café was a meeting place for businessmen, but after the closure of most other cafés during the war,

the intellectuals also moved there, since many of the business people left the country at the beginning of the war. The Express Café, which opened later in the early 70s, was a meeting place for journalists and writers, since it was located across the street from the building of Al-Nahar daily newspaper. This café had a more upper class atmosphere, and more women used to go there on regular basis. According to Ilham, the atmosphere at the Express café was a more comfortable and friendly to woman than other cafes. It was designed to accommodate women, and its nice design encouraged more women to go there.

For Ilham, Mona and others, the cafe functioned as a "collective" but at the same time an intimate space. Women viewed access to the café space as empowering and a sign of freedom and "modernity." By adopting western sites, they could step outside of the local or what some of them refer to as "traditional" patrilineal frames. Here I would argue that the café was a site of freedom, precisely because it was a "liminal" site for both men and women. It is a site outside the usual gift giving and other social obligations. It was a public space, it was exposed to the gazes of outsiders, and it was mixed (men and women) yet still

respectable. This same café was an intimate space for the clique who frequented the same café on regular basis and sat mostly on the same table. Maha summarized the advantages of meeting at the café:

It was easy to meet someone at a café. This was not deemed a formal meeting or a date. It was different from inviting people over to your house or visiting people's homes: you do not need to serve as a host or take a present. At the café you were liberated from the time constraints. You could choose to leave or stay at any time.

Both women and men described Cafes as places where one could bring together an alternative "family" of friends with whom one shared ideology and beliefs. The café became a refuge from the congested traffic and the humidity of the city.

### **Nostalgia about Pre-War Cafes**

When I started my fieldwork in 1996, the café scene in Beirut was not one of my central concerns. Many of my informants suggested meeting me at the Modca café (one of the few surviving prewar cafes). The site itself provoked memories of other prewar cafes and social sites.

Pre-war cafes as social and cultural sites created a group of people who believed that they have a shared memory of the same spaces. In the postwar period, I encountered attempts to immortalize prewar experiences, which can be seen as romanticizing the spaces of the cafes. The memories of the café became a shared and collective knowledge especially for a specific group, which had not been able to accept or blend into new postwar social locals.

In the current era of reconstruction, the inhabitants of the city faced the challenge of familiarizing themselves with postwar new spaces and relations. Many of them find themselves excluded from the postwar spatial and social structures. Most postwar spaces were delineated as "prohibited" sites. At this point of the reconstruction process, people reconstructed imaginary familiar spaces by revisiting their prewar memories. In doing so they were presenting a particular vision of their communities, past(s), and their sense of the public. These visions of the Beirut's public were significantly shaped by class and gender concerns and interests.

The people who attended the Hamra Street cafes idealized the availability of shops and cafes that "happily

offered their contents" to passing pedestrians. This revisiting of the past had to do with the present, a time when they did not have access to familiar sites for socializing and intellectual debates. The lack of social sites represented the state of uncertainty, loss and feeling foreign in one's own home that the war and after created. The buildings now were described as "cold glass windows," as hiding and dividing the inside from the outside. Narrators described the function of the new buildings as temporary, designed without the idea of making one feel at home, but instead, simply to enter, conduct one's business, and leave. Speakers remarked on a loss of a feeling of belonging in the new spaces. "The glass walls - now- are similar to the air bags in a car, it's function starts only when the car is not usable anymore."

Thus, the prewar western café was localized and contextualized as part of the intellectuals historical spatial experiences, unlike the new postwar sites that lack historical significance.

As a number of anthropologists had shown, public spaces such as cafes were symbols of collectivity, since they hosted different cultural and social activities and

were ideally open for everyone. Some of these places were sites where people from different religious backgrounds were able to meet and mingle. Moreover, the cafes were presented as "public" places where men and women socialized together, away from the privacy of their homes. Middle class, intellectual men and women who enjoyed the pre-war Beirut café scene described the availability of numerous "public" places for socializing and meeting foreign and cosmopolitan personalities. They did represent an important public arena that was exclusive for middle class intellectuals.

As public places, however, they were in fact limited or accessible to those who could afford them, and those who were able to cross social, gender and religious boundaries -the intellectuals. Hence, these cafes were "prohibited" locations for those who could not cross these borders - because of money and "modernity." In the social geography of coffee drinking, working class men took their coffee in traditional, not French style cafes, while their wives drank coffee at home. Working class Beirutis had a different prewar coffee drinking experiences. For all

social groups, spaces, identities, and forms involved in coffee sociality transformed dramatically.

### **Wartime Beirut: Where Did Women Drink Coffee During the War**

As part of the war emergencies and, the challenge for those who stayed in the city including intellectuals and middle class women was to routinize the unpredictable, part of this process was making spaces associated with the war familiar ones. As the war continued, most of Beirut's cafes were closed and that kind of space that had satisfied a specific social and political need had to be replaced. The residents of the city adapted to the war environment by developing new daily practices to accommodate and challenge the temporality of the war, including finding or adapting new places for gathering and drinking coffee. These new places started as temporary sites to cope with an emergency situation. Such temporary spaces transformed the meaning of urban space, and continued to exist for the whole period of the war (and some would continue even after the war). The funeral homes and the Espresso vans were examples of such social temporary and mobile transitional sites.

During the war, everyone in Beirut might had expected to die at any moment by a sniper, a rocket, or an

explosion. The fear of death created a temporary collectivity among those who stayed in the city during the war. I heard several times the story -- presumably is a factual account -- of one woman buying bread for her family was shot by a sniper. Every narrator highlighted the image of the woman's blood covering the bread. Every narrator also claimed that the woman was his or her own neighbor, although no one ever identified the woman or the sniper. The significance of this story was not whether the woman was actually a neighbor or not, but its role in creating a social collectivity and a shared war experience. This woman represented all Beiruti women who stayed in the city and went outside during the war, including the storytellers themselves. Women and men were forced to turn to - and create - alternative "public" sites.

The shared fear of the unpredictable danger and death in fact turned funerals into vital sites of daily activities, regular meetings and social events especially for women, who, even though they could move about the city more freely, still had fewer places to go.

Before the war, funerals were usually held at the home of the deceased person for three days. During the war, with

the increasing number of people who attended funerals, the houses of the families of the dead people were not enough to host all those who came to pay condolences. Specialized funeral homes were created out of diverse urban spaces. In many cases, the religious buildings, such as the *husayneya* for the Shiite, functioned as a funeral home. At other times empty spaces such as parking lots or the street itself were used as funeral home. For example, one funeral home served a number of extended families, or people who came from the same village. During the war, women began to go to the same funeral for all three days, especially if they were related to the family. Women found social and emotional refuge in these places. One said:

I had never been to a funeral home [before the war]... but I found myself moving from one funeral home to the other ... it became a war habit. I went to some funerals of people that I knew, and to many of whom I did not know. Sometimes, I would leave the funeral and then ask about the name of the deceased person!

Another woman:

I used to go to funerals to assure myself that I am still alive! And that it is someone else who got killed..

A third woman:

It was a chance to wail *nuwah* for my own miseries  
while everybody is crying about theirs...*kulun yabiki  
ala mawtah*

Amal summarized the advantages of going to funerals during the war by saying: "During funeral days, ...you were always welcomed, no one could ask you to leave; no appointment was necessary; you had the chance to meet many people, hear the latest news and gossip about who died, who left the country, who moved somewhere else and who stayed." Funerals became the wartime coffee drinking spaces for women, in ways that lingered on into the postwar period.

#### **Funerals after the war**

In 1996, I attended a postwar funeral. In two large rooms that opened onto each other, the widow, Umm Adel, her three daughters and her daughter in law sat in their chairs facing the entrance to the apartment. The five women had covered their heads with thin black scarves for the occasion. Umm Adel's grandchildren were playing around the room, eating potato chips. Other women occupied the chairs surrounding Umm Adel and her daughters. There were a number

of empty chairs around the large room. The voice of a tape recorder filled in the room reading verses from the Quran.

Women had come to pay their condolences to the family of Abu Adel. Abu Adel, from humble origins, had died the day before, after suffering from a long illness. The women arrived in-groups of two or three. The minute they entered the room, they went to Um Adel hugged her, then her daughters and her daughter -in-law. Most of the women repeated the same phrases *Illi khalaf ma matt* Those who reproduced (implying sons) did not die," *toul al-ommur la-awladuh* "we wish that God grants long life to the sons." They walked around the room and shook hands with all the women there and sat down. A number of the visitors were accompanied by their children. Three teenage girls, relatives of Um Adel, were serving unsweetened black coffee --traditional Arabic brew-- to the women. In the middle of the room there were a number of coffee tables with different kinds of cigarettes. The women drank their coffee, smoked cigarettes and talked to each other. Women talked to those who were sitting next to them, and every now and then some entered into a conversation with other

women sitting far away from them, asking about the news of people that they knew in common.

On the day Abu Adel died, he was buried immediately, and his family rented a nearby empty apartment with absentee owner to receive guests for three days. Later, Um Adel told me that she had debated with her sons and daughters whether to rent a place or to receive the guests at their home. Um Adel said that since the war, many families stopped renting places for funeral days -- it was not necessary any more. "We were not sure how many people would come. We knew that nowadays it is different from wartime, but we were not sure how different. We decided to rent a place for the funeral. Hundreds of people came, some of them we have not seen since the war ended. During the war, my husband and I went to the funerals of both relatives and strangers *al-qurub wa al-ghurob*, Now these people are paying us back our visits."

Comparing women's reasons for attending the funerals during the war and frequenting the cafes before the war. Both times, they were looking for a "public" place where they are not expected to take a gift. Both times they were seeking a place where they could stay as long as they

wanted, choose when to go and when to leave. Both the café and the funeral home offered social spaces that could be interpreted as both public and private at the same time. The prewar café and the wartime funeral home served as social spaces for women, vis a vis the home and the risk of the streets and other public areas.

If the similarity between wartime funerals and prewar cafes can be seen as spatial, the difference between them lied in the gender, class and temporal dimensions. In the funeral home, unlike the cafes, women were segregated from men, but they integrated across class. While the cafes mixed genders within the same social group, the funeral joined one gender, across different classes. Another difference between the two venues was temporal: the funeral home was a temporary place, open only three days for each deceased person. This meant that Amal's choice to go and pay the condolences and socialize with others was determined by the occurrence of a death. Here I would describe the funeral as a mobile, social space in contrast to the greater stability and permanence of the café. Unlike the café, in the funeral home Amal was not expected to pay for her coffee. This made the funeral home perhaps a more

"public place," in the sense that poorer women participated and people from different economic and social backgrounds attended comfortably, while Beirut's cafes were mapped according to the political, social and economic affiliation of their respective clients.

While men of course attended similar funeral homes, their participation was not the coffee-drinking, socializing events that they were for the women, who had lost most other public meeting places during the war. In addition to the funeral homes, the most popular non-militia site for gathering, socializing and drinking coffee for men was a new development --the mobile espresso vans.

In her novel, *Tai'r mina al-Qammar - A Bird from the Moon*- Leila Usayran describes prewar spaces in Beirut and compares them to the spaces of wartime, through the vehicle of coffee.

A new neighborhood emerged - in the Corniche area - but this time, it was made of lines of small vans that carried espresso coffee machines. People continued their habit of drinking coffee, but this time they are drinking it from Plastic cups... They remembered ... when the coffee man stood clinking his ceramic cups with one hand, while carrying his brass coffeepot on his other shoulder. (Usayran 1996 45-46)

With fewer cafes, during the war men (Christian and Muslim, militia and non-militia) started to gather around the mobile expresso vans on folding chairs on the Corniche (seashore), changing locations as the van moved, which it did day to day. Omar, who owns a small stationary store, told me:

I used to spend many hours sitting around *el-Exbress* . During the war we had plenty of time. We used to go there and see other friends, play cards, discuss politics, and football. The vans were of all colors, models and sizes lined next to each other on the Corniche, and you chose the one that you like.

According to Omar, one of the advantages of these vans was that the prices were affordable. This created a kind of male egalitarian space where no one could brag about his wealth *yemaloo boozat*. "If someone was accompanied by 100 Sri Lankian maids or 100 dogs no one will pay attention to him, for the fact that the seashore is for all people."

Two years into the war, when almost all the cafes closed, the phenomenon of the coffee vans started, and lasted for the whole period of the war. Some of them were

still parked on a few corners during my stay in Beirut. The van owners chose this method for seeming a "safe" form of work during the war, because it kept them close to their families and provided a regular source of income. Abu Talal, a Shiite from a village in South Lebanon, ran one of those most popular vans in the area of Ayn al-Mreisi for more than fifteen years. Before running the coffee van, he had worked in various jobs -- jewelry shop, as a black smith, in making brass, driving a taxi, a bus and for many years a truck driver at the port. Abu Talal had never made a cup of coffee for himself when he bought the van. He hired someone to help him run the van at the beginning. Yet he insisted on following the highest standards, he said: "I bought the best coffee in the market; for the 'Nescafe' Nescafe was the general form for instant coffee , I only used Maxwell House, and Nestle milk. I did not go for the cheap stuff."

As a van operator, Abu Talal created a social atmosphere for himself and for his customers. He controlled the area where his van was located, on the Corniche, which Omar and his friends described as public space that any one had the right to enter. Abu Talal thus privatized part of

one of the most public spaces of the city. The area surrounding the van "belonged" to Abu Talal, meaning he had the responsibility to keep it clean, and protect its reputation. For example, he fired a worker for dealing hashish, which was common in the Corniche area during the war. Also, Abu Talal used the sea for fishing while he was selling his coffee and entertaining his customers.

I had to keep [the van] open for 24 hours. People were there all the time, regardless of the war. When the shelling begins, the customers went back to their homes. The minute it was over, they would come back.

By the end of the war, there were 110 coffee vans on the Corniche area. These vans were competing with each other in different ways, some illegal. Abu Talal said,

my wife and daughters used to come and sit there, this made other women in the area feel comfortable to come and have their coffee there. I treated them as my sisters and my customers did the same.

Yet, when I asked the women about these vans, they did not consider them as spaces for socializing. Some said they would stop by to buy a coffee but walk away.

## **Vans After the War**

In the postwar period, and as part of rebuilding the city, healing the wounds of the war, and constructing a regulated orderly city, and erasing the irregularities of the wartime period. The city tried to regulate the coffee vans phenomenon.

At the time I talked to Omar, the Municipality had decided to get rid of all the espresso vans. The first action was to make all the operators paint their vans white. Next the owners were required to get a license for the van with an official city number. This meant paying fees and taxes for the city. Each van was assigned a location on the Corniche and the licensed vans had to park at least 75 meters from each other.

These regulations and attempts to legalize the war's illegalities could be read as an attempt to put an end to the temporality of the war. But the Municipality's regulations were, ironically, also "temporary," after granting "legal" numbers and licenses, another decree was issued to remove these vans from the Corniche area, before even their licenses expired. This provoked the owners to organize to negotiate for more rights. More than 80 van

owners brought their children and wives to a demonstration at the house of the Prime Minister Hariri. According to one of the organizers: "We made the women and children walk in the front of the demonstration, so the police and the army wouldn't do harm. Also, we wanted to convey the message to the Prime Minister that removing the vans will leave our families without a source of income."

The strategy failed, police beat the women and children. In this case women were visible for the police, unlike when they were invisible for the militiamen during the war. In the postwar they failed to protect the men during the postwar moments of danger.

After long negotiations with the van owners, the Municipality allowed the licensed vans to operate but away from the Corniche or public streets. They were asked to find private property and work from there, which presented a considerable challenge for the van owners. Their response was to find another temporary solution. Many of these van owners tried parking in front of destroyed or abandoned buildings. The postwar vans were not allowed to use chairs, or to utilize the public street for their private business.

The number of these vans was decreasing. Many owners have sold their vans and tried find other sources of income. Some of those that I interviewed were considering renting a shop where they could continue to sell coffee and cold drinks. The official policies thus successfully redefined private and public spaces, with dramatic consequences for daily social practices such as drinking coffee.

### **Postwar Public Spaces: Places that we Can not Relate to**

Looking at the available public spaces in post-war Beirut, there were European cafes, traditional coffeehouses *maqahi*, American fast food restaurants and cafes, and internet and cyber cafes. These sites are constructed in dialogue with both past and the future.

When the war ended, the owner of the Horseshoe café started a new café named the City Café hoping to recreate the atmosphere of the old Horseshoe. It did not work. One of the old customers described the City Café as artificial: "They have nicer design and furniture but those who can afford the city café will not be able to create the intellectual atmosphere they are looking for." The prewar café customers defined the new ones as spaces for the

nouveau riche. Now, the store that once hosted the Horseshoe café is now the fast food chain Pizza Hut.

Reactions to the new forms of coffee venues vary. Many viewed the return of the modern café to Beirut as a healthy phenomenon for women because it gave women the chance to become part of the public scene. Mona believed that the absence of the café during the war affected women's social lives negatively. Yet, Mona herself, one of the regular customers of the prewar express café, did not go on regular basis to the postwar new cafes. She was still looking for the 'right' café. "Every now and then I go to the City Café to meet a friend, or just to regain my ability to read the newspaper cover to cover." But, the new cafes were different from those that existed in the past, she said; the atmosphere was not very welcoming and the prices were expensive such that intellectuals and middle class customers cannot afford everyday.

Another woman explained the phenomena of the increasing number of the expensive restaurants and the decrease in the number of cafes as "a signifier of the decrease in the size of the Middle Class." She viewed this as a deterioration in the position of women. "Women can go

to the cafes alone, while they need to be accompanied with a husband or a family member if they want to go to a restaurant." Thus, postwar public scene can be seen as positive or negative for women but middle class women agree prewar era was better for them.

One thing that was missing for all of these postwar coffee drinkers was the familiarity with and belonging to these new spaces. People were still looking for their favorite public space where they could drink their coffee and socialize on a regular basis. What they were searching for was a kind of social space and social world which, allows them to engage the present and create the future—but now these were only found in the past. In the post-war era, Beirutis were still in the process of securing familiar accessible spaces to become part of the routine of their daily lives. This process was the routinization of the unpredictable, which manifests itself in a longing for a place they can relate to.

During the civil war, women enjoyed the invisible mobility, and the social life of the funerals. Men had their Express vans. The wartime period was especially rich, then, for the working class and for cross-class social

ties. In the postwar period, this had changed. Therefore, a question we might ask is, does Beirut want to recapture the coffee spaces of the prewar period? Or does it, in fact, want the flavor and feel they found in drinking coffee during wartime?

In the postwar era, Beirutis were living in the process of finding familiar "unprohibited" public spaces to be part of the routine of their daily lives. One of these processes was to find what is described as "a place that we can relate to." The question here is: Did people want places similar to those of wartime? or Did they want a life similar to that of prewar times? Looking at the available postwar public spaces in Beirut, there were a few "European" cafes attempting to recreate prewar atmosphere and trying to dialogue *tuhaki* with the cafes that existed before the war. Postwar public spaces included a growing number of fast food restaurants targeting young generations, internet and cyber cafes; and a number of what was called the traditional Beirut cafes such as the Qazaz café -the glass café-; Ramadani tents etc. All of these places were there either to totally replace the old spaces, or to revive some of the old places for new users. What was

not clear yet was the users and city residents opinions and familiarity with postwar places. As mentioned earlier, people I interviewed and talked to were not certain about their favorite public spaces where they could socialize on regular basis.

### **Inventing Ramadani Rituals: Rich Ladies Dancing on the Tables**

During the fasting month of Ramadan, a number of temporary public places were created to provide special kind of entertainment. In many neighborhoods stood what was called Ramadani Tents. A new tradition was invented in postwar Beirut where restaurant owners started temporary tents that were opened for the public to serve the breaking the fasting meal *Iftar*, at sunset time. The tents stayed *sunhour* --the last meal that a fasting person can eat before sunrise-. Special foods, beverages and deserts were offered to the customers, but no alcoholic drinks are served and most of the tents hired musicians to play Arabic music.

Despite the fact these tents were postwar phenomenon, such tents never existed before in Beirut. Many of them carried what was seen as authentic and traditional names of

prewar places. Among these names were Abu Al-Abid Coffeehouse, others used names of tourist places in Egypt such as Khan Al-Khalili. The prices at these tents were not affordable for the majority of the city residents. Omar, a resident of Ayn al-Mreisi neighborhood commented by saying "these tents were made for rich women to dance on the tones of classical Arabic music during the holly month of Ramadan." Omar criticized the customers of these tents and described the those who tended the tents as "Muslims who remembered they were faith in Ramadan. The stopped drinking alcohol and compensated by spending good times drinking mint tea and smoking water pipes, believing they can cheat God."

Similar to Ramadan tents, many of the shops that once exited in prewar downtown area, when they reopened in other parts of the city, they kept their prewar names. The name of the shop on the front doors and on their shopping bags was often followed in a smaller font by the phrase *wast al-balad sabiqan* (located in downtown in the past). Announcing the shop presence in prewar downtown is a way to claim authenticity, continuity, and rootedness to the endangered heart of the city.

This is chapter analyzed the ways remembering prewar and wartime experiences were used in the process of negotiating postwar spaces and participation in decision making regarding the city's present and future. The examples presented how city residents created intimate ties with the past helped to situate people in the present and give them a sense of place (Merriman 1989). Individuals and groups who found themselves marginal to the postwar power structures used the past to legitimate their claims to land and to further their political existence (Layton 1989)

The emerging research on the politics of "heritage," dealing with the issues such as appropriation of the past by the various actors in the present, the contested nature of heritage, and ownership of history (Errington 1979, 1989; Handler 1987; Herzfeld 1982; Johnston 1982) became crucial in understanding issues of urban identity and nationalism. These studies have drawn attention to the ways in which history, memory, and the past become contested and negotiated domains within the politics of the present, the future, and the complex and the multi-layered meanings of heritage.

The struggle over space and heritage was a war over power. The loss of power meant the loss of accessing "public space." Applying Lefebvre's notions of mental, literary and social spaces in the process of the "production of hegemonic" spaces, and the importance of what he called where he demonstrated the -operational or the instrumental spatial practices. "Social space is a social product, in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it" (Lefebvre 1996: 26).

It is true that social space incorporated social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who lived, remembered and longed for social spaces, but these spaces were not static nor mortal, they were forgotten and narrated in different ways by the same individuals and groups at various times and contexts. Lefebvre recognized that social space worked as a tool for the analysis of society, but at the same time called to eliminate the simplistic model of a one-to-one or 'punctual' correspondence between social actions and social

locations, between spatial functions and spatial forms.

(Lefebvre 1996: 34)

While questioning the "public" and the "private" dichotomy we should take into consideration the following: Space is socially and ideologically produced. It does not and cannot exist apart from the events and activities taking place within it. Therefore, space is meaningfully constituted in relation to human agency and activities. Persons and social identities are bound up with geographical place and boundaries are constructed to define territories, choose locales and shape networks.

## Chapter Six

### Healing the Wounds of the War: Placing the War Displaced

*can fi indna beit shir ejoo al-mhajareen a'adoo fi*  
(Once we had a line of poetry, the displaced came and  
lived in it

#### Introduction

The above is from a song by Ziad al-Rahbani<sup>47</sup>, a political singer. I heard this phrase for the first time

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47 Many of the themes of Ziad al-Rahbani's songs are derived from the war. Lebanese across age, class and gender often use phrases from his songs in their daily lives to show the brutality and the nonsense of the civil war. I

while interviewing property owners in Beirut. In this quotation the word *beit shir* means a "line of poetry," and the word *beit* means a house. The metaphorical meaning of the above is that the displaced are taking over all the building and spaces in Beirut, including the fictional line/house of poetry.

This chapter is an ethnographic account of the war displaced population, which who occupies a "liminal position" in postwar Beirut. I explore how the physical reconstruction rebuilding of downtown Beirut marginalizes the displaced by excluding them from the city to be created, and even displacing them yet again in the postwar era. I describe and analyze how the processes of inclusion and exclusion shape ways one marginal group, the displaced, construct narratives of the past. Then, I explore the ways these narratives shape the social and political meanings of prewar and wartime spaces occupied and used by the displaced population.

The displaced are marginal population living in a transitional situation. They develop strategies and means

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could say he is the most popular political singer in Lebanon. His songs are also popular in many other Arab countries.

of negotiation so as to be included in the debates surrounding Beirut's reconstruction project which are dominated by a number of hegemonic groups. Family members, neighbors, and religious and political groups struggle among themselves over space and negotiate how it should be used, managed, preserved and represented. This competition over spaces resulted in the construction of alternative collectivities and alliances (both sectarian and non-sectarian), and new representations of the self and the other in everyday life in post-war Beirut. I examine how power relationships are both embedded and manifested in the struggle over urban sites and space. I demonstrate how the displaced population strategically deploys and manipulates prewar and wartime experiences to evade attempts to control and regulate their spatial relationships and activities in the postwar era.

### **Defining the Displaced**

I use Malki's description of the displaced as "those who are occupying a 'liminal position' in the order of things" (1997:1-2). In postwar Beirut the term "muhajareen/displaced" refers to the residents of the city who identify themselves as such, or are referred to as

"displaced" by governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, political parties, and developmental agencies. Although several definitions of the *muhajreen* do exist, they are viewed as undesirable reminders of the war. Concerned groups and individuals (non-displaced residents of Beirut, governmental organization and the private sector) agree that displacement is a direct result of wartime violence and in order to return to the prewar state of normality, the question of the displaced must be resolved and the city must be "cleaned."

The question to be answered is how diverse organizations and individuals who deal with the issue of displacement such as governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, property owners, 'non-displaced', and investors and developers deal and work with the displaced population in postwar Beirut.

Displacement in Lebanon began in 1969, before the beginning of the sixteen-year civil war, when Israel attacked the villages of South Lebanon. During the years of civil war and as a result of massive damage to residential and commercial areas as well as the physical and socio-economical infrastructures more people both in Beirut and

other parts of Lebanon were forced out of their homes. The official end of the civil war in 1991 did not hinder displacement. Instead, the reconstruction project resulted in the displacement of more people and families, many of whom experienced displacement at least once during the war.

Returning thousands of the displaced became one of the foremost priorities for the postwar government. To solve the problem, the state created two temporary governmental agencies --the Ministry of the Displaced and the Central Fund for the Displaced-- to mediate and organize the negotiation process between the displaced and their political representatives<sup>48</sup> on the one side, and property owners, investors and developers such as Solidere, on the other.

After the permanent cease fire in November of 1990, the newly formed Ministry of the Displaced estimated the losses of the war as follows:

90,000 families<sup>49</sup> had been displaced, with an average of 5.7 persons in each family.

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48 Amal Movement and Hizballah Party are Shiite Muslim political groups in West Beirut.

49 The Lebanese Ministry of the Displaced used the family as a unit to estimate the number of the displaced, without giving a specific definition of the "family." During the

180,000 homes were completely destroyed, and many seriously damaged . 45,000 families illegally occupied the homes of other families. 12,000 families lived in dwellings not designated for human habitation, such as commercial buildings, industrial centers, and buildings liable to collapse" (The Lebanese Ministry of the Displaced 1996: 9). By the end of the war 7.79% of Beirut's houses were either totally or partially damaged (The Lebanese Republic Ministry of the Displaced 1996: 33) .

The interests of the state, developers/investors, and property owners were widely divergent. They shared, however, the opinion that areas and buildings occupied by displaced families needed to be cleared in order to "heal the wounds of the war" and allow city residents to forget the agony of the war." After extensive deliberations between political representatives of the displaced, both governmental organizations working with the displaced and Solidere, a consensus was reached. 'Qualified' displaced were to be paid cash compensation for evacuating the public

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war and after, many relatives joined households of their kin temporarily or permanently.

50 The displaced in Lebanon belonged to the various ethno-religious groups, Christian Marnaites, Greek Orthodox, Sunni Muslim, Shiite Muslim and Druze. In this chapter I focus the situation of the Shiite displaced.

and private properties they had been occupying since the war. Transnational and regional private companies, non-governmental agencies such as Solidere, UNDP, church organizations and political groups are among the institutions and groups that are directly involved in the process of making the displaced people return to their prewar homes.

The Ministry of the Displaced was established in 1990. It is responsible for evacuating the thousands of families from properties they have been occupying since the war. The ministry has the following responsibilities towards the displaced families: Supervision the process of returning to their places of origin or prewar homes, dealing with the emerging daily concerns and needs, and finally negotiating with political groups representing the displaced final solutions. Despite this coordination, different actors who worked closely with the displaced population each adopted a different definition of the *muhajareen* (displaced persons). The Ministry of the Displaced used the following definition in its reports, studies, plans, and surveys:

The displaced person is any individual, Lebanese or non-Lebanese national who lives on Lebanese soil and has been affected by the war and hindered by its

consequences from enjoying his or her full legal and civil rights to the house and properties from which he or she was displaced (The Lebanese Republic Ministry of the Displaced 1996: 5).

According to this definition, most Lebanese people<sup>51</sup> fall into the category of the displaced, since many could present persuasive arguments and evidence showing that they had been uprooted or relocated at least once during the war. This definition is vague leaving it open to manipulation of both agencies and the displaced themselves.

Many Lebanese fled the country for neighboring Arab countries, France, the United States, or Africa. Others moved about within the country, and many moved from one neighborhood to another within the city of Beirut. Generally speaking, in the postwar era of reconstruction, the word "displaced" refers to people who continue to occupy spaces they do not "legally" own or lease.

The word *muhajareen* (displaced) carries a derogatory meaning for most Beirutis, except when the displaced people identify themselves as such. The word *muhajareen* frames the

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<sup>51</sup> Although Palestinians who lived in refugee camps in Beirut were displaced during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1991), they were excluded from the ministry's compensation programs for the displaced.

war-displaced as victims. Similar to the English past participle, it suggests that something was done to them, not that they themselves chose to move; the displaced are not the agents, or cause the problems. Governmental agencies, political groups supporting the displaced, journalists and the displaced themselves used the word *muhajreen* in official records, public discourse and in the media.

Similar to the Lebanese Ministry of the Displaced, The Central Fund for the Displaced is a governmental agency established in 1991 specifically to resolve the problems of displacement in the greater Beirut area. The Central Fund for the Displaced mediates between the Ministry of the Displaced, property owners whose properties are occupied by displaced families, and Solidere. The Central Fund aims at negotiating, encouraging and financing refugee families in Beirut to evacuate properties they are occupying and return to their original prewar homes and residences.

Lebanese researchers working on the issue of displacement argue the numbers presented by the Ministry are not accurate. Abu Rjeileh,<sup>52</sup> a social scientist at the

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Khalil Abu Rjeileh, May 29 1997, Beirut.

Lebanese University who identifies himself as a displaced person, estimates the number of the displaced to be 860,000, while the Ministry of the Displaced estimates it at 750,000. Abu Rjeileh believes two reasons account for the difference in numbers. The Ministry gave the displaced only two months to file claims as displaced, therefore, few people learned about the Ministry's decision and many displaced families who lived outside the country did not have enough time to arrange for filing their claims. Also, many displaced Christians were excluded since they did not recognize the legitimacy of the postwar government, and their political leadership discouraged them from filing for compensation as displaced persons.

Currently, the word *muhajareen* is officially used by government agencies, media, political groups and the displaced themselves. At the same time, owners of the illegally occupied properties, however, and prewar residents of the city used a different word to describe the war-displaced: *muhtaeen* (occupiers). The use of this term reconceptualized the displaced as illegal usurpers and outsiders - as actors with full agency. At the same time it reversed the other term to present the speaker, themselves

as victim of the "occupiers," who therefore were the cause of the problem.

Khalil Abu Rjeileh distinguishes between the *muhajareen* (the real displaced) and the *muhtaleen* (the occupiers). For him, many of those who filed claims for compensation at the Ministry are not 'real displaced' but *muhtaleen* (occupiers), since they own homes other than the ones they are illegally occupying. When asked why people would occupy a house if they already owned another, Abu Rjeileh said:

The real displaced persons fled to Beirut from rural areas during the war. They stayed in schools and public buildings. Most of them evacuated these places soon after the war. They had self-respect and appreciated private property. Thus, they won't take over the property of others. The 'occupiers' who filed claims as displaced persons were in fact wartime militia members, who forced people out of their homes and occupied them during the war.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For example, the Minister of the Displaced, Walid Jumblat was the leader of the Druze militia [The Progressive Socialist Party]. Many Christians accuse the Druze militia of forcing the Christians from their villages in Mount Lebanon.

Analyzing how authorities viewed the differences between the "real displaced" and the "occupiers," helps to consider the concept of legitimacy in this particular context. Is it legitimate for families forced out of their original homes during the war to use/occupy private and state-owned spaces? And is it legitimate for the state agencies and the construction company in the name of rebuilding the city to evict the displaced from the places in which they are living? Abu Rjeileh found it legitimate for the "real displaced" to use "empty" buildings owned by the state, but not privately-owned commercial and residential spaces. He saw the "real displaced" as victims of the war, and as people who respected individual and private property. Accordingly, Abu Rjeileh saw using empty public buildings and spaces as a "legal" action within the context of war emergencies. Similarly, Solidere officials considered the eviction of the war displaced from their wartime spaces an intrinsic part of the process of "cleaning" the city of wartime illegalities. For Solidere, the displaced were seen as an obstacle hindering the plans of rebuilding a cosmopolitan city for the future. What was

missing from their vision was the opinions of the displaced themselves.

The displaced/occupiers also questioned what was legitimate. They argued that, under the circumstances of the war, it was their right to occupy empty buildings and homes in relatively safe areas in the city, since they were unable to have access to their legal homes. Hence, in the postwar era, it was the responsibility of the state, development agencies, and property owners, who would in the future benefit from the contested properties to provide the displaced with alternative housing.

### **Cleansing Postwar Beirut**

The dominant attitudes toward the displaced were manifested in the language used to define and discuss them. Property owners, other residents of the city as well as officials in government and private sector viewed the displaced as an obstacle to the reconstruction and rejuvenation of the city. They often depicted them as rural people who lack a supposedly urban character, marked by 'cosmopolitanism' and 'civility,' and whose continued presence would harm the well being of Beirut. For example,

reflecting on his daily experiences, Basim<sup>54</sup>, a high official at the Central Fund revealed the difficulties of applying the Ministry's definition of the displaced person when he said:

On paper the displaced are those who had to leave their homes because of the war. But in reality we are receiving claims for compensation from those who are originally from villages where there was no actual fighting. But for economic reasons or just for the sake of breathing air *shamm hawa*<sup>55</sup> they came and squatted in Beirut. Others moved to Beirut when they heard of the compensation (after the war ended). We received thousands of applications, two or three times more than we initially estimated.

Basim accuses many of those who filled claims as displaced of abusing the state's agencies in order to illegally gain compensation. The Ministry and the Central Fund find themselves obliged to process claims for compensation from people they believe are not "real

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54 In order to protect the privacy of the informant I changed the real name.

55 Here the official at the Central Fund is being sarcastic. The phrase *shamm hawa* (breathing air) is used to indirectly refer to those who moved from the villages and the mountains to Beirut seeking entertainment and luxurious services that they lack in their villages of origin.

displaced," since the issue is highly politicized and a number of political and religious groups are involved in the process.

The question of the displaced is used for purposes beyond finding alternative homes for thousands of Beirut's residents. Many wartime political parties, influential personalities, and leaders use the issue of displacement to cultivate economic and political gains. In 1996, for example, parliament candidates promised help in exchange for votes. Some candidates offered assistance to selected displaced families to get their compensation in exchange for their votes. Many of the displaced families used their connections with officials at governmental institutions to get late applications accepted. Politicians accused each other of the same ill: giving money intended for the displaced to their followers who were not "real displaced."

Randa, an administrative worker at The Municipality of Beirut said,

Three months before parliament elections, we received a memo informing us that people will come to file for disbursements for home repairs. This was not publicly announced. It was done by word of mouth among Hariri (Prime Minister) supporters. We issued checks for the first few hundreds applicants. Later on, when everyone

in Beirut knew about it, the Municipality postponed any further payments until further notice.

The municipal officials, including Randa, who processed many of the applications, were not informed about the details of the deal between the Municipality and Hariri. She believed that the prime minister had bribed officials at the Municipality. When Randa asked for an explanation, her supervisor informed her that both the Municipality and Hariri benefited from that deal. "Hariri paid money and gained votes, and the Municipality distributed it and collected thousands of overdue fees from city residents who did not pay for the last twenty years." Before accepting the applications for home repairs, the Municipality asked applicants for proof that they had paid all their debts to the Municipality.

The displaced, as well as opposition politicians accused the government institutions of corruption and of abusing funding allocated for the displaced. Najah Wakim, parliament member, accused Prime Minister Hariri and the Minister of the Displaced of diverting 800 million dollars away from the budget of the displaced. Hariri is accused of using the money for paying compensation for their

followers, establishing construction projects not related to the question of the displaced (highways, the sports city and the airport), funding for Solidere's evacuations and underwriting electoral campaigns (Wakim: 1998: 122-123). Those accusations were never substantiated, adding to the environment of rumors and uncertainty.

### **The Displaced as Transitional Beings: Let Us Wait and See**

Although there are a number of agencies and individuals working on the issue of displacement, there is no agreement on the size of the population and there is no agreement on a unified definition of the displaced. The overlap in the responsibilities of the various institutions and individuals working with the displaced make it hard for the displaced themselves to cooperate with and trust the above mentioned agencies.

In the post-war era, the displaced lived in a transitional stage -- a "postwar state of emergency." Many of the displaced expressed this uncertainty in the common refrain, "let us wait and see." In order to accommodate this temporality and uncertainty, the present was silenced, ignored, and put on hold.

The displaced used the past by invoking prewar and wartime memories and experiences to defend their rights over space. In their negotiations for the right to space, the displaced revoked certain memories of wartime in order to present themselves as defenders and protectors of the city, compared to the legal residents who fled and abandoned their city "when it needed them the most." Many of the displaced said, "we paid the price of these places with our blood and nerves," or "we lived in these places for 20 years. Our children are urbanized. They know only Beirut as home." The displaced used such phrases to legitimize their presence and to counter the accusations of being outsiders and illegal occupiers and a burden on the city.

When narrating their experiences, the displaced construct stories around a number of sites, such as their village of origin, or prewar homes in other parts of the city, the various refuge sites in the past 20 years of war, and the present homes they illegally occupy. These narratives generally romanticize the villages of origin for their close and intimate social relations. Many keep contacts with relatives and family members who stayed

behind. Others return to their villages during holidays, elections, funerals and anniversaries. At the same time many decline the government's plans of returning to their prewar homes for a number of reasons. The villages lack job opportunities, education for their children, and health services various religious and non-governmental organizations offer in Beirut. Many of the displaced explained their refusal to go back to their prewar home for the lack of enough space to accommodate their growing families, or for the fact that their homes had been destroyed beyond repair. A large number of displaced families expressed fear and resentment about going back to their places of origin, since many of them left their homes after experiencing massacres and threats there. Finally, although some of them maintain contacts with relatives who stayed behind and often returned to their villages for occasions (holidays, elections, funerals and anniversaries) they expressed the lack of social and economic networks there.

Intellectuals, some political groups and the displaced themselves criticized the idea that the displaced should return to their prewar homes. Intellectuals suggested that

the state should provide displaced families with alternative housing in government managed housing projects, or provide them construction materials to rebuild their homes in their prewar places of residence. They criticized the government for granting absolute authority to the private sector, investors and entrepreneurs in carrying out most of the postwar recovery projects such as the rebuilding downtown and evacuating the displaced population (Corm 1996; Salam 1998; Tabet 1996). The sociologist Nabil Beyhum denounced the plans for the city center for not addressing the social problems concerning the return of city dwellers to their places of activity and the displaced to their original homes. According to him "the project will not bring the end of displacement. On the contrary it could provoke more displacement" (Beyhum 1994: 21-22). Paying cash compensation to the displaced was a provisional solution and would not encourage the displaced to go back to their prewar homes.

The displaced faced a number of obstacles that obstructed them from going back to places of origin. First, the majority of the displaced in Beirut came from rural areas that lacked basic services and job opportunities.

Second, it was impossible for many of the Shiite of south Lebanon<sup>56</sup> to return to their villages, since many of the villages were at the time still occupied by Israel<sup>57</sup>; in fact the Israeli army was still forcing yet more to leave. Third, the displaced had lived and adopted an urban lifestyle. A whole generation had been born and raised in the city, and their identities and their socio-economic networks were shaped by its urban context.

#### **The Displaced as a Threat to the National Harmony**

The techniques of enframing, of fixing the interior and exterior, and of positioning the observing subject, are what create an appearance of order, an order that works by appearance (Mitchell 1988: 60).

In *Purity and Exile*, Malki sees a systematic invisibility of refugees in the literature on nations and nationalism, for the mere fact that refugees are not yet classified as part of the nation. "They are not seen as representatives of any particular local culture and they

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56 A large number of the displaced who received compensation are Shiite Muslims from South Lebanon.

57 The Israeli army withdrew from large areas of South Lebanon in 2000.

have lost a kind of imagined cultural authority to stand for 'their kind' or for the imagined whole of which they are or were part of" (Malki 1997: 7).

In Beirut, the displaced did not fit anywhere in the existing postwar hierarchies. Because the displaced were viewed as a population without legitimate space, I would argue that they live in a state of 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1967: 97). They are treated as "refugees" within their own country, without necessarily crossing international borders. The displaced continued to live in a phase of temporality and uncertainty and they are viewed as a reminder of the war. The displaced families had been living and occupying in the same places for the last 20 years but they are denied the right to the places they occupied or experienced throughout their long journey of refuge.

Since the end of the civil war in 1991, the Lebanese media and daily newspapers addressed the issue of the displaced on a daily basis. In response to the continued concerns among the public, and influenced by developers, investors and the government agencies' discourses, the media presented the displaced as an obstacle which needed

to be removed in order to put an end to the war. The media reinforced the image of the displaced as outsiders, as violent intruders in the urban "culture" of the city, as expressed in these typical newspaper excerpts:

Evacuations of the displaced did not pass peacefully: Confrontations and hostilities took place (Al-Anwar, October 10 1996: 7).

Is al-Mreije [a neighborhood where many displaced families live] turning into a new Wadi Abu Jmil? The number of the building occupiers is doubling. There is chaos in registering the names. 750 families became 2500. Some of these families are living in cardboard shacks (al-Nahar, Jun 25 1996: 8).

Three police troops, ambulances and fire department vehicles waited for the predicted conflict that never took place. Elisar postponed the evacuation of the displaced in the area of the Kuwaiti Embassy (Al-Anwar, October, 9 1996: 5)

These newspaper excerpts portrayed conflicts and resistance on the part of the displaced acting against the state institutions and those who work on behalf of investors and developers.

Three civilians and fourteen policemen were injured in the Qintari area confrontations. The residents are

asking to stop the explosives in the Vinecia Tunnel. The Central Fund for the Displaced promised to solve the problem (al-Nahar, January 28 1997: 12).

The evacuation of the displaced was associated with different forms of violence. The state assigned a special police troop to work with the Central Fund for the Displaced and Solidere in the evacuation process. In 1996, a building occupied by displaced families collapsed when Solidere demolished an adjacent building with dynamite. A family of six who had been waiting for the promised compensation was killed. An official at the Central Fund of the Displaced I interviewed, blamed the displaced for their own death. He said "While the head of the family was running around bargaining for higher compensation, the house collapsed and killed his wife and children. They refused to take the compensation suggested by Solidere; they wanted more and more."

The media excerpts cited earlier have suggested that the displaced abused and forged claims to gain greater compensation from Solidere and state institutions. Stories were told both in the media and in informal conversations about huge amounts of money granted to some of the

displaced based solely on clientalism and connections with influential personalities. There were rumors of families who received close to 100,000 dollars in compensation. These stories, regardless of their dubious authority and despite their negative connotation, gave the displaced higher expectations of receiving compensation. Families who managed to receive their compensation considered themselves unfairly paid compared to payments they heard of in other stories.

This confusion and uncertainty created an aura of secrecy around the compensation. Wadi Abu Jmil, a neighborhood in the Solidere area became shorthand for corruption and unfairness in the distribution of compensation money. Wadi Abu Jmil was mockingly called *Wadi al-dahab* "the valley of gold," referring to the questionable and excessive payments obtained by political parties for their clients there. This created chaos and illusions for both the displaced themselves and the organizations handling their claims. A similar example was of Hay Lif, another neighborhood in Beirut. According to the Ministry's initial survey of this neighborhood, there were only 65 displaced families, but by the time the

ministry started the evacuation process, they had to pay compensation to 300 families<sup>58</sup>. After that, Hay Lif was dubbed "Bank Lif."

In Wadi Abu-Jmil, Solidere faced serious challenges. Since this area was the last in the evacuation program, the political parties and groups in the neighborhood, who had learned about the process in other neighborhoods, were well prepared. Many of them conducted their own surveys of the number of displaced families and presented numbers different from those conducted by the Central Fund for the Displaced or Solidere. One of Solidere's employees charged the displaced people with trying to "milk Solidere," claiming that the new numbers were three times what was estimated in the initial survey.

During the evacuation process in Wadi Abu Jmil, political parties asked the displaced not to abandon the occupied properties without first getting compensation<sup>59</sup>. A Solidere employee said: "We knew that some of these families had never lived there, but we did not want to use

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58 An interview with official at the Ministry of the Displaced.

violence. That might lead to political conflicts. We did not want to start another war."

The Amal Movement presented itself as the major political power in Ayn al-Mreisi neighborhood. Sami, the Amal Movement representative in the area showed me long lists with names of displaced families. According to these lists, 2-6 families shared the same apartment and some times the same room. Through interviewing displaced families in Ayn al-Mreisi, I noticed that in most apartments there was at least one adult family member and children of other related families present at the disputed property in case representatives from Solidere or the Central Fund for the Displaced stop by.

I visited Um Hussein who lived in a three-bedroom apartment in an old building in Ayn al-Mreisi. The apartment was almost empty except for some broken chairs. The glass windows were replaced with plastic and wooden boards, and the walls were not painted. Um Hussein, a 50 year old woman was there with her two grandchildren. At the beginning, she was very hesitant to answer my questions, on

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59 In the process of evacuation, political parties, mostly, Hizballah, and Amal Movement presented themselves as defendants and representatives of the displaced.

how many people permanently live in the apartment and their strategies of negotiating with the Central Fund for the Displaced. After I informed her that Sami, Amal Movement's representative in the area referred me to her, she told me that there were a total of 21 individuals (4 families) registered as residents of the apartment (Um Hussein herself, her married son, her married daughter and her husband's brother and their families).

Um Hussein, her husband and children moved to this apartment after being displaced from Eastern Beirut in 1976. Her oldest son, who was a member of one of the militias found the apartment. In a later visit, Um Hussein informed me the four families did not permanently live in the apartment, but during the war they lived there for various periods of time. Members of these families often visited and sometimes stayed over. Her son bought an apartment in the southern suburb of Beirut, and the husband's brother built a small house in the village of origin in South Lebanon. She added:

This apartment is not enough for all of us, look at the its physical condition, human beings cannot live in such a place. During the war, we did not have any other choice. Now, we learned that the displaced will

be receiving compensation based on the number of families living in the property. My son filed for the four families. Amal Movement is following up the case on our behalf with the government and the property owner. When we get the money we will pay it as the first payment for another apartment in a place we can afford.

State officials and investors accused political parties of politically and economically abusing the question of displacement through encouraging the displaced to file false claims. In Wadi Abu Jmil. According to the initial survey of the Central Fund for the Displaced, there were 2000 displaced families, by the time of evacuation there were 8000 families claiming to be displaced. Kareem, an official at the Central Fund for the Displaced said "When we started the evacuation, we found families living in uninhabitable buildings, the walls were completely worn out, no windows or doors, but these families claimed to live there. Within two months every whole in downtown area was occupied by a displaced family."

He gave an example of the building of the Rivoli Theater, located next to Martyr Square in downtown Beirut. It is a huge building with a large hall and high ceilings,

on the upper floors there were 150 offices and 40 shops. "It is impossible by any means for more than 200 families to live there. For this building we received claims from more than 1000 families. When people heard about the compensation, buses started unloading men, women and children of all ages to stay at the Rivoli building. Most of them came from the same villages and were mostly relatives. Before they heard about the compensation, a few workers [single men] from these villages were living there. Then they invited their families and relatives."

Kareem described many of the families that got the compensation as 'fictitious.' "When we went to clear the displaced from a studio apartment in downtown area, there were posters of naked women on the walls, and nine families claimed to share the 30 square meter room. How did they sleep there? Why would conservative Shiite Muslim families hang posters of naked women on the walls?"

State officials such as Kareem believed that Solidere raised the expectations of the compensation by overpaying the some of the displaced families in Beirut's Central District. Another government official stated that Solidere signed contracts, and drafted its plans for downtown area

without taking into consideration the thousands of the displaced occupying most of the buildings in the area. Solidere wanted to immediately execute its plans to avoid paying fines to their contractors. This is why they overpaid the displaced.

Solidere paid more than double the amount it was supposed to pay for evacuating the displaced. This raised the expectations of the displaced living in other areas of the city. An official at the Ministry of the Displaced said "the act of overpaying the displaced by Solidere affected the work of the Ministry and the Central Fund for the Displaced negatively. The people believed they can get the same compensation from the government and from property owners. He added "they [the displaced people] want to milk us [as a state]"<sup>60</sup>.

Unlike many Beiruti dwellers, who associated wartime spaces and experiences with violence and impairment, the displaced spoke approvingly about the wartime period for the availability of economic resources, their involvement in political groups and parties, and most importantly,

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60 This is a common saying in Lebanon to mean exploitation.

their control over the city. Compared to the past, the present was mostly described as the worst in terms of economic instability, lack of services, conflict among family members, and most importantly, the sense of being disoriented or lost, not knowing how to negotiate for information, power and resources.

It is worth mentioning here that although many of the displaced families had been living in the same places for the last 20 years, they nonetheless were denied the right of attaching themselves to these places, or to others they experienced throughout their long journey of refuge. Legitimate property owners, who had the support of the state, may have lived out of the country during the entire war (often entrusting their homes to servants), and could return to reclaim their property without question. Claiming legitimacy became a key issue in the negotiation process for compensation for the displaced as well as property owners. Property owners believed they had the legal right to evict the displaced from their properties; while the displaced believed they had legitimate rights either to stay in the occupied spaces or to receive compensation.

For the children of the displaced, the current illegal places of residence might be the only spaces they experienced as a 'homes.' Most of the children of the displaced who grew up in the illegal occupied spaces continue to live in illegally after they get married. Many of them informally or illegally bought or leased homes (office space, a share in an apartment, a room in a hotel) from other displaced families. The dilemma is that the displaced and their sons and daughters claim they acquired the right of using these spaces by "buying" them from other displaced persons. The displaced argue they that technically own these properties since they paid for them during the war, and the legal owners of these properties were not in Lebanon at they time they "bought" their homes.

The cases of Sahar and Ali illustrate the complex strategies and networks the displaced had to deal with in order to make their voices heard. These strategies include collecting information from various sources, such as employees at government institutions, workers in the private sector, gossip and rumors from other displaced and individuals affiliated with political parties. After collecting relevant information they have to find ways of

using it in the process of negotiating compensation and/or securing alternative housing.

### **Who Owns this Apartment? Sahar**

For many of the displaced and their children, the current places of residence might have been the only spaces they experienced as a "home." Most of the sons and daughters of the displaced who grew up in the illegal spaces continued to live in other illegal spaces after they got married. Many displaced "illegally" bought or leased spaces (office space, a share in an apartment, a room in a hotel) from other displaced families in a kind of real estate black market. The sons and daughters of the displaced claimed they acquired the right of using these spaces because they had bought them — that is, paid for them—from other displaced during the war, when there was no state or owner to buy anything from.

One of these contested owners was Sahar. When I met Sahar in 1996, she was staying with her in-laws in Beirut. Having recently returned from three years in Saudi Arabia, she was now locked out of the apartment she had once "owned." Sahar's family had moved to Ayn al-Mreisi from

East Beirut<sup>61</sup> at the beginning of the war when she was eight years old. After growing up there, she married Ahmed, a displaced living in the same neighborhood. They managed to "buy" an apartment from another displaced family nearby.

We did not have enough money to pay for the apartment, so I sold my gold --the dowry --to buy our apartment. We renovated it, replaced the windows, painted the walls, and connected the apartment to electricity from a neighboring generator<sup>62</sup>. We lived there for six years. Then my husband got a job in Saudi Arabia. We left it and kept the keys of our apartment with my in-laws.

Sahar viewed the apartment as hers, based on her memories and experiences. She paid for it with her dowry, she renovated it and it was the place in which she married and gave birth to her children. According to the original owner of the apartment, however, Sahar and her husband were illegal occupiers of his property.

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<sup>61</sup> During the war, Beirut was divided into East and West, Christian and Muslim with the infamous green line "no man's land" a 10 mile long line dividing the two parts of the city.

<sup>62</sup> Until recently, the state did not provide electricity to residential areas. It was the responsibility of each house to provide its own. Enterprising people bought generators and provided electricity to their neighbors, charging them on a monthly or weekly basis.

When Sahar heard about the compensation while out of the country, she asked her in-laws to file a claim on her behalf. "One day, we received a phone call from my in-laws informing us that the property owner had broken into our apartment and thrown away our furniture and belongings. She flew back to Beirut immediately."

Officials at the Ministry of the Displaced informed Sahar she was ineligible for compensation, because hers was not considered a "real displaced family." The Ministry did not grant Sahar or her family displaced status since she and her husband experienced displacement while they were still children, before marriage. Sahar argues that since both she and her husband were displaced as children and married during the war, they should be counted as a displaced family. Sahar supported her claim by giving names of people who had a similar background and who had received compensation. When Sahar compared her situation with similar cases, she neglected to mention that these families did not leave their place and live in another country. Although Sahar and her in-laws tried to follow postwar legal procedures by filing for claims at the Ministry of

the Displaced, and sought alternative political channels as well, she lost the right to her home.

Sahar was later informed that she was ineligible for compensation because she and her family were living outside the country at the time of filing. The original owner of the building --who lived in France during the war-- claimed that he left a court order of evacuation under the door of Sahar's apartment. Sahar believed the ministry ignored her application for compensation because the original owner had access to influential people and connections, and she accused him of illegally obtaining the eviction order.

Sahar's case is an example of the way words such as displaced or occupiers, legal or illegal and family or home become contested and reinterpreted. This uncertainty and unpredictability placed Sahar's daily life on hold and shaped her plans for the future.

I do not know what to do with my furniture. Now it is all piled up on a balcony at my in-laws, exposed to the sun and humidity. I cannot live with my in-laws for a long time. Their apartment is too small. In addition they [the in-laws] themselves received a notice to evacuate. They do not know where they will end up.

Sahar was caught in intricate circles of bureaucracy, family issues and the practicalities of daily life. She had to leave Saudi Arabia and return to Beirut to rescue her furniture and try to collect compensation. She has to prove her eligibility for compensation to the officials at the Ministry of the Displaced and the property owner. At the same time, she had to negotiate new relationships and division of labor with her in-laws. For example, her mother and sister in-law looked after her children when she visited the Ministry of the Displaced; in return the mother in-law expected to receive some of the forthcoming compensation. Sahar and her children shared one bedroom apartment with her mother and two sisters-in-law.

In order to receive compensation, Sahar had to prove to the state that she was a displaced person. By doing so, Sahar maneuvered the state's discourse that, as a displaced person, she was illegally occupying someone else's property. Sahar, however, believed she had the right to the apartment she occupied for so many years, if not to actually live there then to win compensation.

### **Trapped in Bureaucracy and Sectarianism: Ali**

In the postwar era, the division of labor between state institutions, developers, investors, and local religious and political groups was not clear. There was an overlap in the responsibilities and personnel of public and private sectors. For example, one man might have held a governmental position, owned construction companies, and at the same time been a political or religious leader, as well as former militia commander. Because of this confusion of roles, when Beirutis needed to access resources they "ran around in circles."

Ali, a Shiite from a village in South Lebanon, was forced to move with his family to Beirut in 1979, when he was 15 years old. During the war, he joined various political groups and militias. Because and he knew the militia leaders in control of the neighborhood where he lived, Ali knew how to secure the daily needs for his family, including finding housing. Based on information he collected through informal channels, gossip, and news, Ali believed the displaced were going to be evacuated from the places they occupied. After the war, he was no longer sure

how to contact the right institution or authority in order to receive his compensation.

I met Ali while he was waiting for compensation from the Central Fund for the Displaced. In the aftermath of the war, the re-establishment of the state had given the Lebanese hope that the days of reliance on neighborhood strongmen and militia leaders were behind them. Based on this optimism, Ali had tried to file his claim with the fund without the interference of political groups or using clientelism<sup>63</sup>. Ali hoped he would be able to receive his compensation without relying on his sectarian background. "Now that there is a legitimate state, we do not have to seek sectarian connections and alliances."

Ali, who identified himself as displaced, described his relation to the political organization and the ambiguity in the responsibilities of the state's institutions and the political and religious groups as follows:

Now we [the displaced] do not know the *usul al-iuba al-jadida* (rules of the new game) of how, where, and who can provide us with services and support. After the war the logic of things has changed. During the

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<sup>63</sup> Johnson, M. (1986) *Class and Client in Beirut: The Sunni Muslim Community and the Lebanese State 1840-1985*. NJ: Ithaca Press.

war, I used to go and ask the leader to find me an apartment, or find me a job. After the war, the politicians sensed that we are not completely dependent upon them as before. But they are trying to keep us under their control. They want us to be like sheep that they own. They want us to realize that we cannot get anything without their interference. Unfortunately, the government is afraid of the political and religious leaders. It listens to them but not to us. They are the government and the opposition at the same time. What can I tell you? 'If your enemy is the judge, to whom can you complain?'

Now he was not so sure. The wartime militias and associated mafias, rather than being eclipsed by the state, now operated within it. Ali suspected that the political leadership of obstructing his application because he did not ask them for their 'help.' He complained about the obstacles he faced in the process of filing for the compensation:

When I heard about the compensation, I tried to file on my own. I went to the ministry several times. I stood in line for hours. Before seeing any of the officials at the ministry, I heard from other refugees that we had to collect signatures from the Central

Fund for the Displaced, the Mukhtar<sup>64</sup> of the village of that we come from, and the Mukhtar of the neighborhood in Beirut [where he now lived]. I collected all the necessary documents and signatures and came back. When I made it to the official at the ministry, he asked me to go back for more documents and official signatures. These state officials would not pay attention to any application if it did not come through an influential person.

A few months later, Ali managed to receive his compensation, and this time he was grateful to the political/sectarian leadership who had negotiated on his behalf at the Ministry of the Displaced. Ali described the negotiation procedure as follows:

Finally, my cousin [who is a displaced] told me that he knew someone who is influential at the ministry and can mediate on my behalf. The help was on the condition that I use the compensation money to buy an apartment at a housing project managed by the mediator and his brother.

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64 A *mukhtar* is a neighborhood-level authority, elected by the people of the neighborhood. The Mukhtar communicates between the people of the neighborhood and the state. He is responsible for registering births and deaths and issuing proof of residence.

Ali and other displaced had to try different contacts and mediators to receive their compensation. Ali accepted his cousin's solution because he was not sure he would be able to make any gains, especially after he heard rumors that the budget of the Ministry of the Displaced would not be enough to compensate all the displaced. This meant the displaced who were connected to influential groups or personalities would be compensated, and the rest would be left out. The negotiation process involves direct and indirect reciprocity and commitment between the displaced and the patrons who are negotiating on their behalf.

Like many of the displaced in Beirut, Ali and his family would have to move from the neighborhood, close to the Beirut Central District where they have lived for the past 17 years. Ali complained the compensation he received "would not buy me a wall in this neighborhood." His mediator suggested that he move to a housing project, which happened to be owned by the mediator and his brother. Ali considered himself lucky because he was able to receive his compensation and at the same time guarantee an apartment in a building owned by *nas wasleen* (influential people.) Ali expects that in 10 years, if the government decides to

apply its urban planning regulations to that area, his influential mediator would protect the interests of the residents of the building, since the mediator and his relatives own half of the apartments in the same building.

When I asked Ali why he did not move back to his village of origin, he responded: "Who is going to feed my family? My work is here in Beirut and my village is far from here. In addition, the compensation money is not enough for me to buy land and build a house in the village." Ali's compensation was paid as a first installment for a two-bedroom apartment he had so far only seen on an architectural drawing. The apartment had not yet been built.

Now that it is summertime, I sent my wife and children to stay with my mother in the village. I am staying temporarily with friends and relatives in Beirut. Sometimes, I sleep at construction sites and get paid as a night guard. The serious problems will start when school starts [in the fall]. Who is going to host my three children in the city? I do not want to think about it right now!

Ali's case demonstrates the uncertainty and the ambiguity in the rules and obligations of the state, the

developers and investors, and the political parties. The residents of the city had to ask the politicians for support to have access to state institutions, and could not use direct channels, so they end up using similar networks as those they used during the war.

Although Ali and his mediator agreed on the conditions of the help, outcome was not guaranteed. The mediator/landlord was not sure Ali would give him his compensation as a down payment for an apartment in his housing project. Ali was not sure the mediator would help him get the compensation, and did not know what might happen to him if he decided to keep the money and look for housing elsewhere.

Ali's case shows the complexity of negotiating for compensation. Most displaced were not sure how much money they would be paid, or when. Many did not know where to go after being evacuated. In most cases, the ways the displaced managed to receive their compensation determined their future plans and reinforce their sense of uncertainty in the present and the unpredictability of the future. Should they return to their villages of origin? Should they buy or rent places in the city? Should they use all the

compensation money for alternative housing? Or are there more urgent needs in which to invest their money? The negotiation process goes beyond the state and politicians and enters the private sphere of the family.

### **Najah Gets Her Apartment Back**

The process of evacuating displaced was not recent to Beirut residents. Both during and immediately after the war (before the state started its official programs to place the displaced) some property owners managed to reclaim their property from wartime tenants who were paying low or no rents on their own. The owners employed a number of means and methods to get back their occupied properties, one common strategy was to threaten by using militias or the Syrian army. If the displaced were not "well connected," the owners evicted them without paying any compensation. In other situations where both property owners and the displaced had connections, negotiation of negotiation was more complicated.

In response, the displaced similar strategies based on the power and influence of their *al-wasta*, *mahsobia* connections and cliantalism. The owners often agreed to pay

*khliw* --an amount of money to the displaced for evacuating the properties they occupied. The following case of Najah demonstrates the complexity of the process and the various strategies employed in that process both by property owners and the displaced.

Najah is a social worker who worked for international agencies during and after the war. She moved to Beirut in 1970 as a college student and legally rented an apartment on Hamra Street in a newly built modern building with an elevator. She lived in the same apartment from 1970-1993. During the war she worked at the Palestinian refugee camps and with the war displaced. Najah used to pass through a number of checkpoints on her way to work. "During the war there was no fear. I was very busy. There was no time to be afraid, or to think about fear. Destruction was everywhere... but I trained my eyes not to see it. It became part of the everyday view... My friends and I convinced ourselves that when a bullet enters the body, it does not hurt."

During the war many of Najah's neighbors and friends left their apartments seeking safety elsewhere. The building had 164 apartments and at one point during the war only nine people remained in the whole building. Najah

asserts that because she stayed in the building during the dangerous wartime, she deserved more rights to the space she legally leased.

Najah recalls her worst war experience when she almost lost her apartment to a displaced family.

After being stranded in the Palestinian refugee camp for a week, I came back home and my keys did not work. My neighbors informed me that the Amal movement took my apartment and changed the lock. I contacted some influential people to get my apartment back. They advised me to forget and to find another place. They warned me I might get kidnapped or killed if I try to break into my own apartment. [Amal movement was the militia in control of Najah's neighborhood at that time]. I knocked on the door. There was a displaced family, a husband, a wife, and two children, in addition to the wife's brother and the sister. They informed me that Amal Movement told that I was out of the country, and my apartment was empty and available. I offered the family occupying my home 50,000 LL to leave. (This was my salary for a month). They refused to take the money, and I refused to step out of my apartment. I slept on the couch in the living room with the kitchen knife next to me. I forced the whole family to sleep in the only bedroom. In the morning, the family contacted militiamen from Amal and the Syrian army. Five heavily armed men came to force me out of my apartment. One of the militiamen has an

artificial arm. I recognized him. I said to him: I know you. You got your artificial arm from the clinic where I worked a few months ago. He remembered that I helped him when he came to the clinic. He ordered the displaced family to leave immediately and I got my apartment back.

Both Najah and the displaced family used their sectarian and other connections as means of negotiation and power as they laid claim to the same contested space. It was evident that the war created alternative roles and norms regarding the rights of using the apartment. In this situation both the involved parties sought help and support from the same connection, political groups and/or militia. Initially, when Najah tried to reclaim her apartment, the connection of the displaced family was stronger than hers. When Najah failed to receive support from political groups, she tried to offer the displaced all the money she had. Then she decided to stay with the displaced family in the apartment regardless of the potential danger. Finally, she managed to get back her apartment through the help of Amal movement militiamen. In this case one militiaman helped Najah who is not a Shiite Muslim and did not back up the displaced family who belonged to the his own sect.

Najah's case was different from that of Ali in that she was not a displaced person claimed her apartment during the war, and at that time the state's institutions were completely absent. Ali, who was a displaced person, had to follow the legal bureaucratic channels, yet he had to seek connections to make sure his application would be given a priority.

#### **I Might not be Here Next Winter: Sarah**

In the postwar era, the non-displaced population was living through the same uncertainty and unpredictability regarding housing arrangements. Many families who lived legally in rented apartments faced the possibility of being evicted from their homes. People who lived in buildings located close to the downtown area (appropriated by the Solidere project) were not certain if the owners of these buildings were going to sell their property to investors and developers, or if they would evict the old tenants in order to demolish the buildings and construct new luxury apartment buildings and offices, or to rent their property for higher prices.

Some residential buildings were occupied by both displaced and legal tenants who were facing the danger of future evictions. Al Jawhara, a five-story building adjacent to the prewar red-light district was built in the 1960s to provide furnished apartments for tourists, prostitutes, and married men looking for a "get away" from their homes. Now displaced families occupied part of Al Jawhara building, and a few prewar tenants legally lived in the same building. The owner(s)<sup>25</sup> did not maintain the building. The elevator had not worked for 10 years, thick plastic substituted for glass windows. The entrance to the building did not have a gate and some of the steps were broken. The steps were crumbling.

Sarah, a single Syrian woman in her late 50s, had lived in the same two-bedroom apartment for the last 40 years. On the wall of her tiny living room hung a large, framed black-and-white photo of a man. Sarah referred to him as "my French father,"<sup>26</sup> at the opposite corner stands a

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<sup>25</sup> The building's residents do not know the new owner(s) of the building nor their future plans for the building.

<sup>26</sup> Sarah was brought to Beirut when she was 10 years old to work as a maid for a French man in the 1940s. A French army general adopted Mary. He stayed in Beirut after the French left, and died there in 1971.

poorly small decorated plastic Christmas tree. Sarah spent most of her time at Georgette's, her Armenian neighbor, who was ill and did not have anyone to take care of her.

Residents of Al Jawhara building described their situation by saying "we do not know where we will spend our next winter." Sarah described an unexplained visit by a well-dressed young woman accompanied by a man from the government *rajul dawala* who came and measured the apartments and counted the rooms in each one. Sarah and her neighbors learned that the woman is the daughter of the new owner of the building. The tenants asked the woman if they were planning to sell or demolish the building. The young women responded by saying "who is going to buy the building when people like your are living here?" Later on Sarah and the other tenants learned that the woman is a lawyer and she will be in charge of the building, and she is planning to evict some of the tenants before renovating it. The tenants did not know the name of the daughter nor her future plans. Tenants heard many rumors, one of them was that new owner was planning to sell the building, another suggested that the government was planning to confiscate the property to build a park. Yet another held that

Solidere was going to buy the building to incorporate it with its project. Sarah hoped that the government would not take the building because it was known among Beirut residents that when the government takes over a building, it did not give good compensation to the residents. She hoped that Solidere will take over the Al Jawhara building so she would receive better compensation.

Sarah never left her apartment during the war because she was afraid that the displaced would occupy it. "I had to stay here to protect my home. I had whole nights of horror, sometimes I was terrified of being by myself. Once the militiamen placed *madfa* (a cannon) on the top of the building across the street from my apartment. I was afraid the militiamen on the other side would bomb my building to destroy the cannon," she told me. Sarah pointed to a dark hallway between the bathroom and the living room and said, "that corner witnessed my tears and fear. For days I slept, ate, had my coffee and wept there. When the bombing got heavier I would go downstairs and stay with the family who lived on the first floor. Their apartment was small and at one point there were four families --more than 17 people-- sharing the two-bedroom apartment."

Sarah managed to keep her apartment during the war. But now she did not know if she could stay there. The owner was not discussing the building's future plans with the tenants. Sarah continues to live with much uncertainty of 'lets wait and see.'

Displaced families, prewar legal tenants as well as the property owners were unable to access resources and services due to the postwar uncertainty and unpredictability. All of them believe their rights to housing were being violated, and presented themselves as victims of the war as well as victims of each other and of governmental institutions.

### **The Displaced Are Polluting the City**

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home, or correspondence, or to attack upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks " (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 12)

According to this Article, the Lebanese state and its institutions (the Ministry of the Displaced, the Central Fund for the Displaced) as well as private developers such as Solidere which were supported by the government were all

violating the rights of the displaced to a decent home, privacy and reputation. The rights of the displaced were denied based on their "illegality." Moreover, their agendas for the displaced were causing more displacement in the name of development and reconstruction, and created what could only call a state of postwar emergency. Solidere's project as a developmental scheme caused further dislocation of people by forcing the war-displaced to evacuate occupied properties -- displacing them yet again-- and displacing even some of the legal tenants and owners not only in downtown Beirut, but in other surrounding areas.

Malki explains the absence of refugees in anthropological analysis by referring to Turner's suggestion that refugees are -- "transitional beings and are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere"<sup>67</sup>. [They] are at the very least 'betwixt and between'" (1967: 97). Refugees are seen to hemorrhage or weaken national boundaries and to pose a threat to 'national security'; as is time and again

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<sup>67</sup> In terms of any recognized cultural topography.

asserted in the discourse of refugee policy." (Malki, 1997: 7)

In Beirut, most of the apartments and spaces occupied by the displaced are in a state of decay. The owners are not willing to invest in properties that are occupied by illegal residents, and the displaced are not willing to fix these places since they are not sure for how long they will be able to stay in these same spaces.

Generally speaking, all the solutions for the question of displacement implied the return of the population to its prewar locations. Both the agencies implementing the solutions and their critics shared the view that the displaced should be removed from Beirut and its surroundings. There were no calls for incorporating the displaced in the new plans of downtown area and its surroundings. The displaced were accused of endangering the city by ruralizing it because they lacked the "culture of the city." In *The Suspended City*, for example Wadah Shararah described the displaced population in Beirut, as temporary residents of the city who impose their "authentic rural culture" on the urban environment without integrating into the city's rational and social life. He continued to

accuse them of hindering Beirut's urban heritage by 'ruralizing' it, and even violating it through the use of violence (Shararah 1985: 13-15). Some of the critiques of the cash compensation solution were based on the idea that the displaced were unable to take wise decisions on how to spend the money, and did not care about the country or its national economy. The displaced were described as ignorant of what was good for themselves and for their city. One consultant I interviewed, who preferred anonymity said that the money that was paid to the displaced people was a waste. According to him:

The displaced are limited socially, education-wise, and culturally. They managed to get a good amount of money, both legally and illegally. They did not buy houses or land, and did not invest [the compensation] in establishing businesses. Many of them spent the money on marrying a second wife, buying gold, expensive cars, and mobile phones. Unfortunately the money was spent on dead items. If they started a commercial business, in two years their money might have doubled and this would have revived the economy of the country. Marrying a second wife, and buying gold or cars is a waste.

The discourse surrounding the evacuation of the displaced is associated with discourses on modernity, urban

planning, rebuilding, and reconstruction. Displacement is seen as a serious obstacle to the implementation of the agendas of reconstruction and modernity. The displaced are viewed as lacking urban culture, disturbing the social order of the city by making it grubby, dirty, and backward. In this context, "modernity" is interpreted as a way to clean and organize disordered spaces, getting rid of urban illegalities such as the war-displaced, and granting more power to private sector. Placing the displaced implies aesthetics and modernizing aspects, but it is also a continual exercising and a reproduction of unequal power relations.

The identity of the modern city is created by what it keeps out. Its modernity is something contingent upon the exclusion of its opposite. (Mitchell 1988:165) The process of evacuating the displaced from the commercial and residential areas by giving them cash compensation is criticized by many political and concerned individuals and groups. Many suggest that, the displaced should be given alternative housing in governmental managed housing projects, or they should be provided with construction materials to rebuild their homes in their prewar places of

residence. Many of the displaced move to areas surrounding Beirut and creating new illegal situations, (mostly in the Southern Suburb of Beirut).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The cases and presented in this chapter demonstrate the instability in the lives of the displaced population during and after the war. The displaced are the victims of the war and after the war they are the victims of reconstruction. In the postwar era the displaced population continue to live in a state of liminality and marginality. Their voices were not included in discourses surrounding the future of the city. They were seen as reminders of the war instability and unpredictability. The media as well as politicians and non-displaced residents of the city see the displaced as outsiders who endanger the postwar normality.

Developers and investors present their projects as means to modernize and consequently improve life in the city. Their agendas include the "upgrading" and "ordering" of space through the implementation of urban planning laws and regulations. The re-ordering of space implies making these spaces inhabitable for new users and consequently

depriving marginal and powerless groups from accessing these same spaces. Urban planners and developers use vocabulary related to issues of hygiene and cleanliness, for example cleaning the displaced, improving a neighborhood, and eliminating informal and illegal activities.

The disadvantaged are dislocated because they are unable to pay the costs and do not fit the agendas of investors and developers. This leads them to create new squatter areas somewhere else. The results of these projects are revealed only in the long term, and oftentimes reproduce the symptoms they were designed to eliminate. In the meantime, the social and political ruptures created by top-down planning do not heal.

## **Conclusion**

In order to establish legitimacy after the chaos of a long war, Beirut's postwar government focuses on restoring its institutions and reclaiming its roles in placing order in the city. The new government, besides the functions of day to day operations, has to resolve a host of byproducts of the war, such as placing the thousands of displaced, incorporating the war militias into postwar communities, reconciling opposing sectarian and political groups, and forging one unified history among the eighteen recognized ethno-religious groups. The municipality's priority is given to rebuilding Beirut's Central District, an issue that touches on the other issues: in order to rebuild the area, the city must remove the displaced who are currently living there, it must define who's past deserves to be recognized, and it must establish mechanisms to replace the wartime militia channels.

This reconstruction of the downtown is seen as a basis for solving the problems of the wartime era. Beneath all the contention, the various actors do agree that Beirut must rebuild the war-torn downtown area, which is commonly referred to as the "heart" of the city. The future downtown

is viewed as the melting pot of Lebanon where different sects and ideologies will interact as they used to, and rebuilding it is the only way to heal "the wounds of the war." Official and popular discourses claim that a restored downtown area will demonstrate that Beirut is no longer divided, and that spaces which were prohibited during the war will have become once again accessible for everybody. All residents of Beirut are waiting for the "rebirth" of the downtown area, to regain its prewar role as the cultural and financial center of the Middle East. But how should Beirut be rebuilt? By (and for) whom? While they agree that the downtown must be rebuilt, residents are concerned about how it will happen. They suspect that the way in which it will be rebuilt will exclude them; and in most cases, their suspicions are justified. Residents want a role in determining "the city of the future" in order to secure space that they can belong to.

To reconstruct the destroyed center of Beirut, the private company Solidere was appointed by the state in 1994. Since then, Solidere and other regional and international developers and investors launched the largest urban reconstruction project of the 1990s worldwide. This

study has attempted to show that the reconstruction project is transforming the physical appearance of Beirut, and how those transformations affect the lives, futures, and identities of its residents.

Any discussion about space by necessity is a discussion about time. In this ethnography, I move back and forth between space and place, on the one hand, and time or history on the other, both of which are affected by uncertainty in the present. I argue that the inhabitants of Beirut continue to live in a state of liminality, or what I call "postwar emergencies". The concept of liminal, with its sense of the mobile, flux, and the uncertain, is helpful to describe a phase not as a permanent, static configuration. Any framework that solidifies categories of power, identity, and spatial affiliation is too limiting for the case of postwar Beirut. For the residents of Beirut continue to engage in negotiation and develop survival strategies. Beirut residents often continue to use alliances and networks from the war years, while at the same time they develop new networks and coalitions to respond to the postwar emergencies. For example, displaced families are trying to position themselves within the

postwar hierarchies. In order to participate in city decision-making, to find homes, and arrange practicalities for the future, they are forced to find ways to negotiate in multiple directions: with property owners, state institutions (the Municipality of Beirut, the Central Fund for the Displaced and the Ministry of the Displaced) and private investors (Solidere).

Facing this complex and changing urban context, this ethnography questions traditional anthropological methodologies in general, and anthropological studies of the Middle East in particular. Departing from the traditional approach, this study is not an ethnography of a single isolated group, tribe, or community; it is not about one specific village or a neighborhood; it is not about the strategies the less-powerful use against the powerful. Rather, this work is an ethnography of spaces and memory. It documents the accounts of residents of their relation to various places in Beirut across time—time, that is, as they experience it. It accounts for how they conceive of various spaces and how those conceptions have changed, or how they are remembered. The work considers multiple urban spaces and sites, explaining the complex ways these spaces are

used, negotiated for and contested by international, regional and local actors.

To recognize and understand these contestations over space, I find it helpful to use the framework of discourse. I analyze the competing discourses surrounding the reconstruction project of downtown Beirut, an array of narratives, definitions, and debates that involves the city across time-- from its ancient past, through the war years, to its future-- as well as the identities of certain people (especially the displaced). The participants in these debates cover the spectrum of power and privilege. At the higher end, there are regional and international entrepreneurs with their respective economic interests, urban planners and architects, whose main concern is to reshape the physical appearance of the city and to rebuild a "cosmopolitan" urban center, and property owners. In the middle of the spectrum are intellectuals (social scientists, historians, writers, artists, religious and political leaders) whose main concern is to conserve Beirut's threatened culture, pasts, heritage and identities. Included here are the regular residents of the city who are looking for places to socialize, such as the

intellectual women who used to frequent the European style cafés. At the other end are those who actually used the space before or during the war, "legitimate" tenants and the displaced population, who are negotiating to hold on to or return to places they used, or, if they have to leave, to win higher compensation for evacuating. Across all chapters of this ethnography, I presented these various discourses which together show that there is no single history of the city: Beirut's history is still in the making, and this work captures this one very transitional moment in that continual making. Each account shows the unequal power relationships in the hierarchy of Beirut. Participants in these debates invoke their prewar and wartime memories, experiences, ethno-religious identities as well as their future interests and agendas in the competition over urban space. When they remember their experiences, Beirutis are not simply recording events of the past. They are calling upon the past to transform the unwanted reality of the present and determine the future. My analysis is based on the idea that history is not simply informing us of what really occurred (Denig 1988; Boyarin 1994): in fact historical interpretation are more about the

way the past is appropriated in the present for future agendas.

Among those voices that are critical of Solidere, the privileged groups and individuals with access to power are able to represent their experiences and views towards the reconstruction project through "hegemonic texts". Chapter Two, which examined the arguments for conservation, showed that in these hegemonic texts, the past, the heritage and the "authentic" are central to debates about Beirut's future. In social science literature, the role of intellectuals in the reinterpretation of the past via hegemonic texts is discussed widely, but usually with an emphasis on Western contexts (Anderson 1982; Foucault 1977; Gramsci 1971; Said 1994).

In Beirut, however, other residents of the city who have been affected by reconstruction are unable to participate in the process of interpreting the city's past through the same means. Tenants, the displaced, the fishermen, the Mosque committee - the "regular people" - develop other strategies of self-representation, negotiation, and participation. One of these key strategies is remembrance. Individuals and groups frequently and

freely told me about their prewar and wartime experiences. In almost any conversation I conducted, the speaker began four or five sentences with the refrain, "I remember..." or, to a companion, "Do you remember..." They communicate these narratives through familiar means: social gatherings, gossip, and the collection of material objects. In this act of remembering, the past becomes a shelter against undesirable realities of the present. This selective remembering (and its counterpart, forgetting) creates a collectivity that helps achieve a new sense of the self and identity. When the past is reconstructed and interpreted through the eye of the present and the future, the narrators are achieving political unity, establishing territorial boundaries and creating a collective identity.

Two chapters of this study explore strategies of remembering and forgetting through documenting the spatial experiences of the residents of one neighborhood adjacent to the downtown reconstruction site, Ayn al-Mreisi. Both chapters explained how the excluded populations develop new means to claim urban spaces and to be included in the reconstruction process. Maintaining memory through geography and the recollection of personal experiences is a

way they challenge hegemonic powers. Prewar "original" residents - such as fishermen and artists -- or war migrants - such as the displaced and former militia members - mobilized to highlight the historical importance of their respective neighborhood to protect their rights to space and heritage. These groups construct alternative histories which expressed themselves through public speeches, demonstrations, gossip, and political alliances. Toward that end, groups established a neighborhood museum, held annual heritage festivals, initiated community celebrations of religious and national holidays, and formed political coalitions and alliances during parliament elections.

In these performed narratives and interpretations, the past is not limited by time. Those invoking the past refer to a range of time periods; some even 'remember' events and spaces experienced and lived by others, or recall events and sites that are elsewhere considered mythical. This yearning is what Marilyn Strathern suggests scholars should thematise as an object of cultural analysis (Strathern 1995: 110-111). While Strathern is oriented by psychoanalytic approach, my sense of yearning is less centered on psychology. In my understanding of the

situation in Beirut, the speakers who recall the past are using it to create new social contexts. In Chapter Six I explained how residents of the area who originated from different backgrounds, but who lived side by side during the war, establish a network or some kind of social belonging by remembering, that is, by telling stories about the time they were united (in surviving the war). In this case, they used the past not only for practical claims of space, but to preserve social bonds.

For every resident I interviewed, what they yearned for in postwar Beirut was familiarity with and belonging to the newly constructed spaces, as they used to experience with the earlier spaces. City residents continued to look for their favorite café, or public social site, where they could drink their coffee and socialize. The fishermen were hoping against odds to regain their port. The displaced were eager to secure permanent homes, as bases for the other aspects of their lives. What they were searching for was a kind of familiar space and a social world which would allow them to engage the present and create the future—but for most Beirutis these were only found in the past. In the post-war era, Beirutis were still in the process of

securing familiar accessible spaces to become part of the routine of their daily lives. This process is what this ethnography calls the routinization of the unpredictable, which manifests itself in a longing for a place they can relate to.

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