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The Emerging Urban Landscape of Lebanon

Michael F. Davie

Living in a Lebanese city in the twenty-first century is not a rosy prospect, despite optimistic projections that Lebanon is in a period of recovery. The 1990s slogan *al-balad macheh* (the country is moving) expressed a collective will to rebuild the country after years of civil war and economic hardship and to reestablish Beirut as the financial and cultural capital of the Middle East. Lebanese politicians heralded Lebanon's return to democracy; state institutions proclaimed their intention to modernize; economists lauded the widespread benefits of rebuilding Beirut's city center; and small private businesses were confident of their ability to rescue the Lebanese economy.

The difficulties of survival in postwar Beirut, however, are many. Lebanon's political uncertainties and mismanagement, the consequences of the failures of the Middle East peace process, the glaring destruction of the country's rural and urban environments, and increasing opposition to the reconstruction of Beirut all have contributed to a feeling of helplessness in the face of a threatening future.

This chapter explores the ways in which Lebanese cities have evolved since the 1920s and predicts development trends for the next twenty-five years, basing its analysis on historical research and current fieldwork. The destruction of traditional social forces in the creation of the Lebanese republic led to the emergence of new elites. It also meant the end of policies that regulated development, resulting in uncontrolled urbanization and urban disorder. The Lebanese civil war damaged these elites and shredded the urban fabric, allowing new actors, the militias, to redefine Beirut in a national and regional context.

Today, the reconstruction of Beirut is attempting to reshape the city in the context of a new global economy, bringing different elites to the fore. The continued growth of Beirut and other Lebanese cities is part of a trend toward 100 percent urban population, which will require new strategies

for urban planning and governance. Lebanon's ability to meet these challenges will determine the future of the Lebanese metropolis.

The Urban Landscape and the Ottoman Empire

Prior to 1920, Lebanese cities developed under the aegis of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman urbanization period was marked by strict city planning, the building of roads and squares by municipalities, the imposition of building and aesthetic norms, the planned linkage of road, rail, and port infrastructures in a coherent regional vision, and the participation of large portions of the local population in decision-making processes.

This last point is perhaps most important. Through a sophisticated system of urban representation, most residents of the city, as well as all religious groups, were part of various *majlis*. This inclusive system prevented governmental representatives from making widely unpopular decisions and ensured the protection of common interests. It recognized the city as a living instrument that required continual fine tuning.

The local Beirut elite headed the municipality and was instrumental in building the city's port, introducing gas and electricity, modernizing the Sahat al Burj as a business center with a distinctive architecture, and making plans to link the Damascus Road to the port with new wide streets (a plan that was partially completed by the end of World War I). The Ottoman urbanization period also encompassed the opening of public gardens and the construction of new and imposing public buildings, a railway station, schools, universities, and hospitals. The quintessential Beirut invention, the family house with three arches and a red tile roof, became a common sight in the city during this time.

In retrospect, this period was one of harmonious urbanization directed by a self-regulating local government, a situation shared by most cities of the Ottoman Empire. There was enough work for almost everyone, and there was always room on the ships for those who contemplated emigration. Immigrants from Mount Lebanon, who had suffered from chronic insecurity, economic crises, and feudal conflicts since the 1840s, were absorbed into the city and did not upset its socioeconomic balance.

The Urban Landscape and the Lebanese Republic

The situation changed radically in 1920, when France became the political power in the Levant. Almost overnight, the old *millet* system was abol-

ished and a new country invented (Greater Lebanon, or *état du Grand-Liban*). Beirut, a city with only limited economic links and no political links to Mount Lebanon, was annexed to this new state made up of rural areas and was declared its capital. The French military authorities reconfigured Beirut in the manner of a North African colony. Their first step was to surround it with barracks, then to link the port to these defensive points. Their second step was to destroy the heart of the city and reorganize the road system, mimicking the Place de l'Etoile in Paris. They extended the port to accommodate the French Mediterranean fleet and large cargo vessels and built a landing field for airplanes on the city's outskirts.

The most important transformations were political and demographic. The old Beirut elite was supplanted first by direct French rule, then in 1926 by a Lebanese republic under French mandate. In Lebanon's confessional system of government, officials are elected through a one-man, one-vote system, but the major religious communities—most importantly, Maronite Christian, Orthodox Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shi'a Muslim, and Druze—agree to share power by dividing government positions on the basis of religion. Lebanon's first (and, to date, only) census in 1932 gave Christians a slight numerical majority over the other religious communities in this delicately balanced system. Lebanon became an independent sovereign state in 1943.

This political shift is key to understanding Lebanon's urban morphology. The religious communities did not have the know-how, means, or inclination to manage a city according to clear-cut rules or shared urban interests. Because of a heavy-handed French presence, the Beirut municipal government was reduced to simply managing basic urban services, while real decisions were made elsewhere. At the same time, Beirut was perceived by the new elites as a source of wealth for their impoverished mountain communities. The city and its port provided new jobs for extended family and village neighbors. Direct and indirect corruption became rampant, as the new elites used their access to the workings of the city and port to buy political favors.

Many rural Lebanese migrated to the cities. There they were joined by a significant number of foreign immigrants. French authorities resettled survivors of the Armenian genocide in Beirut because as Christians, their presence would give the demographic edge to the Maronites, strongly allied with the French. Other settlers included French military staff and their families, Kurdish laborers from eastern Anatolia, Syria, and Iraq, Palestin-

ian bourgeois, Syrians from the now Turkish-annexed *sanjaq* of Alexandretta, merchants from all over the Mediterranean, White Russians, and Assyrian and Chaldean refugees from Iraq.

The result was urban sprawl, as Beirut rapidly and haphazardly expanded toward the coast and the sand dunes to the south, and new neighborhoods (such as Burj-Hammoud and Karm al-Zeitoun for the Armenians) were created. The new cityscape, unlike that of the Ottoman period, had no master plan, no regulating bodies, and, most importantly, no clear economic goals. Instead of a relatively well planned city, the new suburbs (today's outer municipal periphery) were a sum of individual, low-quality buildings whose footprint often matched the irregular plots on which they were built. Their architectural style contrasted sharply with the buildings of the old city. Cement and concrete replaced sandstone *ramleh*. Tall apartment buildings replaced one-family houses. The new buildings first spread along the main roads, then beyond them into fields whose land patterns determined the shape of the new neighborhoods. The composition of old neighborhoods also changed. Traditionally Greek Orthodox quarters (such as Achrafiyyeh) had an influx of Maronites; Basta, a typically Sunni urban area, received Kurds of rural origin; Ras Beirut, which had been mainly bourgeois Sunni and Orthodox, saw an increase in the numbers of foreigners and Lebanese of other religious communities.

The expansion of Beirut was mirrored by the expansion of Lebanon's secondary cities, Tripoli and Sidon, as well as of its small mountain villages. These communities spread from an original nucleus toward abandoned terrace farms or small subsistence farms operated by a declining number of farmers. Revenues from Beirut and abroad not only fostered this expansion but modified traditional land-property structures. In many villages, church land was sold to the new town-based bourgeoisie, consolidating their semifeudal political power. New wealth also brought tourism as city dwellers returned to the mountain for summer vacations, frequenting growing communities with service-oriented economies such as Aley, Bhamdoun, Sofar, Beit-Meri, and Broummana. Expansion of secondary coastal cities and villages was spurred by the widespread use of the automobile: Jounieh, Jebail, Batroun, and Chtaura in the Beqaa Valley were among the communities that profited from an increasingly mobile population. The result was a radical transformation of the Lebanese countryside as well as the Lebanese urban landscape.

The Urban Landscape in the Post–World War II Era

The next major change in Lebanon's urban development came in the wake of World War II and the 1948 war in Palestine. Beirut in particular was affected by the influx of Palestinians into Lebanon. The Palestinian presence in Beirut created two distinct urban morphologies. The first was that of the impoverished refugee camps (Sabra and Mar Elias in the sand dunes to the south, and Tel ez-Zaatar and Jisr el-Basha in the still-rural foothills around the city). In their social organization, attitudes toward the city, extended family solidarities, and political representation (usually by the *moukhtars* of their villages), the camps had a distinctly rural atmosphere. Some of their traditions persist today, although the camps are now surrounded by new city neighborhoods. The second morphology was of the Palestinian urban bourgeoisie and upper class, who avoided the sordid camps and settled in established city neighborhoods. They quickly invested in land and businesses and were the driving force behind Beirut's successful new commercial and financial district, Hamra.

Hamra was the ideal site for the grounding of the new Lebanese economy. After World War II, Lebanese elites realized that the United States had supplanted old European allies such as France and created new global markets. At the same time, two major historical developments made Lebanon a regional economic center: the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states and the closure of Israeli ports to Arab ships. The oil-rich countries did not have the know-how, the personnel, or the banks to handle the vast sums of revenue generated by the precious resource. They turned to Beirut, with its history of entrepreneurism and its absence of strict banking laws, for help. The closure of Israeli ports to Arab traffic made Beirut the only modern, well-equipped Arab port in the eastern Mediterranean. All merchandise in transit to the inland states, which had not yet built their own ports, had to go through Beirut, which in turn extracted healthy revenues for its services.

Some of the profit from these new ventures was reinvested in Hamra, whose spaciousness and modern architectural character made the center of Beirut, with its now-quaint Mandate architecture, narrow streets, and stuffy family atmosphere, seem obsolete. The Beirut urban landscape became even more complex. The old city center settled into a slumber of neglect and decay, while Hamra, with its new buildings and Western air, became a unique attraction for Lebanese and foreigners alike. Hamra, whose main buildings are still standing, offered cafés, cinemas, shops, and

offices, along with hotels that catered to foreigners doing business in Lebanon. It provided new jobs for both Lebanese and Palestinian refugees.

The modernization of Beirut (and of Tripoli, Sidon, and larger towns) occurred at a favorable moment in Lebanese history, when abundant capital and labor, linked to global economic interests, made Lebanon a major player in the world economy and guaranteed its protection by Western powers such as the United States. This was the case in 1958, when U.S. troops shored up the Lebanese government in order to ensure the unfettered activity of the oil companies in the region. Lebanon also benefited from the introduction of state socialism in many Middle Eastern countries, which suffered under a corresponding burden of state bureaucracy and the stifling of individual initiative. Unfettered Lebanon, in contrast, basked in the myth of the "Lebanese miracle."

The "Lebanese miracle," however, was no boon to the development of Lebanon's urban landscape. Economic prosperity justified the lack of state intervention in urban planning, even as to basic architectural and building codes. Belated plans drawn up during the Chehab period failed to address the issue of urban sprawl seriously. As a result, Lebanon's main towns and cities became chaotic cityscapes, a mixture of old and new, tall and low, business and residential, with little discernable hierarchy. In Beirut, the crowded Mandate suburbs were rebuilt to accommodate a never-ending influx of Lebanese from the interior (Furn el-Chebbak, Ain al-Rumaneh, and Chiyyah are typical examples of these suburbs). In Sidon and Tripoli, as in the larger towns, the same uncontrolled development produced a dense urban mass.

The new wave of development gave birth to Western-style upper-class residential communities on the heights above Beirut (such as Yarzeh, Rabieh, Naccache, Yanar, Bchemoun, Mechref, and Adonis) and new summer resorts in the mountains, along with an expansion of housing for middle-class Beirutis. Despite these islands of prosperity, the suburbs close to the city remained, as always, densely populated by lower- or middle-class white-collar workers, and on the periphery of the suburbs were slums or substandard housing that sheltered refugees and new immigrants from rural communities. The slums abutted the Palestinian refugee camps. Prosperous Beirut thus developed a spatial framework common to Third World cities, a framework that still exists today.

In this urban magma, previous social structures and allegiances and current social realities made a volatile mix. Urban Lebanese of the 1950s and 1960s retained their traditional rural ties because the Lebanese political system prevented the forging of new urban identities and elites. Resid-

ing in a city did not make you a citizen of the city: Lebanese still voted in the constituency of their parents, as defined by the 1932 census. Divided according to social status, and again by religion or by geographic origin, urban Lebanese constituted a politically amorphous mass, docile only as long as economic prosperity continued.

Throughout this period, wars and disorders in neighboring countries continued to benefit Lebanon. The 1956 Suez crisis and the closure of the Suez Canal made Beirut's port and airport undisputed regional relay points. The nationalization of businesses in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt brought fresh capital and well-educated immigrants to Lebanon. The extensions of its port and the opening of its new airport made Beirut newly important in the context of Western economic interests, especially after the 1967 war, when they provided the only access for land-locked Middle Eastern countries such as Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

Lebanon's cities, however, could not indefinitely absorb the workforce of the region. Increasingly, both Lebanese and foreign nationals emigrated to places such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Africa in search of work opportunities. Money earned abroad made its way back to Lebanon, stimulating an unregulated building industry and an increasing urban disorder that would play a major factor in the Lebanese civil war.

The Urban Landscape and the Lebanese Civil War

There is a strong link between Lebanon's urban disorder and the outbreak of its civil war. The Palestinian and fundamentalist Muslim militancy that fed military conflicts such as Black September and the 1973 Arab-Israeli war was an urban or periurban phenomenon, bred in refugee camps and slums. Beirut was a center of such activity, providing a space for politically active Palestinian refugees, organized into disciplined military forces, to join together with Lebanese recently moved to the capital from other areas of the country.

The failure of Lebanon's liberal economy was physically expressed in Beirut's overcrowded, ever-expanding suburbs. While the "modern" parts of the city were being built (Hamra, the residential suburbs, Ras Beirut), and while some privileged sectors were prospering from Beirut's monopoly on regional travel, the rest of the economy was in decline. Agriculture was abandoned in favor of land speculation. Industry was never a national priority. Tourism and the service industry were left to small-scale family operations. The lack of jobs and continuing social and political

marginalization drove the low-income population of the suburbs toward radical organizations that offered simple solutions to complex questions, using nationalism or religion as the main vector of their message.

Residents of the suburbs were tempted by the prosperous city centers, looking at them as the loci for money and stability. Control of the city centers meant control of wealth and power. The Lebanese civil war started in the Beirut suburbs, only spreading to the city center toward the end of 1975. Suburban militias plundered and destroyed the city center, and this takeover of the center by the periphery meant the start of a new phase in Lebanon's urban development.

In the first years of the war, Beirut was divided into two cities, undergoing the equivalent of ethnic purification along religious lines. The mostly Muslim survivors of the assaults against Tel ez-Zaatar, Karantina, and Jisr el-Basha camps flowed into what was now called West Beirut, while mostly Christian refugees from Damour, Moussaitbeh, Hamra, Ras Beirut, or Kantari crossed over to East Beirut. Incessant reciprocal shelling forced many of the city's inhabitants to move out of range of artillery, radically expanding the populations of Adonis, Ajaltoun, Reifoun, Jounieh or Dora, Aramoun, Choueifat, and Sidon. This first wave of urbanization caused by the war quickly transformed the coastal strip and lower slopes of the mountain (the villages of Mazraat Yachouh and Mansouriyeh are good examples). The breakdown of the remaining municipal services, the control by the militias of the urban regulatory bodies, and the economic free-for-all further contributed to urban chaos.

A second wave of urbanization followed the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978. Within a few days, the main cities to the south of Beirut, as well as most of West Beirut, were overrun by refugees seeking shelter from the Israeli assault. Soon, refugees became illegal squatters on public and private property, largely in the southern suburbs, but also in closed or abandoned apartments in Ras Beirut and the pericentral sector of the city. Hamra, once the showcase of Lebanon's westernized economy and culture, now mirrored the rural habits of its new population. After the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the old bourgeois Achrafiyeh neighborhood sheltered refugees from the Shouf alongside militiamen.

After 1984, the effects of the new urbanization were felt on the outskirts of the city. To the north, Jounieh was urbanized from Haret el-Sakhr to Adma and further inland above Tabarja. Ajaltoun and Feytroun nearly merged, and Faraya became a year-round residential center. New residential complexes were built on the beach for year-round use, and schools and universities were relocated to surprising locations. Branches of govern-

ment ministries were opened in each militia-held territory, as were television and radio stations. Strategic roads were cut through the remaining open areas, while new ports and an airport were built toward Jebail.

To the south of the city, many militias vied for control of the coast. As soon as it secured territory, however, each militia encouraged the building of infrastructure that would make it less dependent on other areas. This happened in the Shouf, the Sidon area, and the Koura and Ehden-Bcharreh sectors.

The total breakdown of state authority, coupled with the total control of urban spaces by the militias, encouraged the uncontrolled urbanization of most of the western slopes of central Mount Lebanon. Economic liberalism was pushed to the extreme, with no controls on business or profit making. The militias were huge economic players, investing capital in import-export opportunities, collecting parallel taxes and protection money, and reinvesting in building projects, land, and infrastructure. They did not, however, provide any solutions to the deepening urban crisis. The militias merely continued the economic logic of prewar Lebanon: let the market economy reign, but without any social safety net or any real effort to make the system more productive.

The Urban Landscape in the Post-Civil War Era

After the end of the war, a new elite came to power, with a very different agenda than that of the militia and military leaders who controlled Lebanon during the civil war. This new group analyzed the urban crisis in clear-cut terms: Beirut must regain its former status, both as the locus of national prosperity and as Lebanon's link to the new world economic order. The idea was simple: Beirut would again be the relay point between the financial, economic, and decision-making cities of the north (in the United States and Europe), the Gulf states, and the successful Asian states. Its strategic location, liberal economy, westernized culture, and white-collar labor force would make it an integral part of the new world economic order established after the failure of the Soviet Union. Capital from the oil-rich states would be managed by the Lebanese banks, stocks would be exchanged by Arabic-speaking brokers, and foreign investors would use the country as a fiscal haven. The success of Beirut would in turn herald economic prosperity for the rest of Lebanon.

For the first time since the start of the French mandate, the elite realized that urban planning, with controls and regulations, was necessary for the success of the new Beirut. The city center was to be rebuilt in accordance

with a detailed plan that met international architectural and building standards. Implementing this plan required a clean slate. One investment company, *Solidaire*, was given a monopoly on rebuilding the city center, with the right to exercise eminent domain over all private property. In return, it issued bonds as compensation to property owners.

The plan mirrored current thinking on the role of space in the global economy: space has value only when it is organized according to the needs of potential investors, not according to its position in a city. This meant that the city center would no longer be the meeting point of all the country's population, containing the central bus station and the main *souks* (markets). For the sake of efficiency, the urban landscape would be radically changed, making the city center a place for white-collar workers. Economic productivity would be achieved at the price of diversity. The city center would become a safe, sanitized, politically neutral environment, so as not to endanger the trust of its international investors.

The elite that developed this reconstruction plan, however, still had to operate within the larger context of Lebanon's religious and political system. The confessional republic established in the 1920s survived the war, although the 1990 Ta'if Agreement made modifications in power sharing between the Christian and Muslim communities. In order to gain support for the reconstruction and consolidate a hold on the city center, the elite had to cede power to the periphery, giving control of other regions of Lebanon to religious leaders. These alliances ensured that the reconstruction would not be a forum for grassroots urban democracy or a resurrected Beirut Urban Authority. The CDR (Conseil du Développement et de la Reconstruction) was directly linked to the prime minister's office. Decisions relating to urban questions would be made under complete control of the political leaders.

The reconstruction project received unambiguous support from most parts of Lebanese and Beirut society from 1992 to 1996. Any criticism was branded as sabotage, and no open debate on the project took place. The destruction of the old city center proceeded, creating a new urban landscape. Landowners, merchants, and bankers saw the reconstruction as an opportunity to recoup losses sustained during the war. Land could be sold at good prices (or shares obtained in an apparently prosperous and promising company, *Solidaire*), businesses and shops could reopen, and capital would once again be available. The lower classes saw the reconstruction as providing job opportunities in the building sites or in the service economy. Young Lebanese saw it as proof of a new era in their country's history, confirming the end of the old militia order and urban

anarchy. Diaspora Lebanese welcomed the reconstruction as proof that the war had ended, that it was safe to come back to work and invest in Lebanon.

Elsewhere in Lebanon, other reconstruction projects were taking place with less fanfare. After more than ten years of interrupted work, the Linord project filled in the northern coast between Antelias and Dbayeh and planned to link it with another infill between Dora and Antelias. This wholly private venture deeply marked the urban landscape and ecology of Lebanon. In Beirut's southern suburbs, a government project, Elisar, was redeveloping the areas around the Palestinian refugee camps, affecting Sabra-Shatila camps, Bir Hassan and Bourj-Barajneh, Moa'awwad, and part of the Choueifat plain. An urban landscape of slums, illegal housing, and narrow streets was to be replaced by a model residential and light-industry city. A new network of roads was planned, including a toll highway that would link Beirut to other cities and a widening of the Beirut-Damascus highway to link the city center, port, and new airport.

This flurry of development gave observers grounds for optimism. Jobs had been created (albeit for the foreign work force), the national economy had benefited, and there had been a building boom (although the thousands of luxury apartments produced remained empty). The problem of squatters had been solved to the general satisfaction of all concerned, from the displaced persons to the politicians who protected them, and the city's infrastructure had been put into semi-working order.

The political system, however, seemed more conservative than ever. There was little room for the development of new political parties or of a new political consciousness among the urban citizens of the country, who still voted in their ancestors' place of origin. The concrete aspects of Lebanon's inclusion in the new global economy had been planned, but the social aspects had been ignored.

Lebanon's Reconstruction and the New Global Economy

Beirut is at a turning point, with the heritage of the past hundred years still evident and the future urban landscape still taking shape. The *Solidaire* project is planned to end in the early 2020s, and the northern coast infill will not be completed until the 2010s. The new road infrastructure and the extensions of the port and airport will not be totally operational before 2010. Reconstruction projects in other Lebanese cities are on the same timetable.

The economic benefits of the reconstruction for Lebanon, however, do not seem as great as in the early to mid-1990s. The recent global economic crisis, together with the collapse of Asian markets, the destabilization of the major currencies, and the possibility of recession, poses important questions as to the value of the new Beirut as a regional financial hub. The Lebanese workforce is expensive and not particularly knowledgeable in sophisticated production techniques. It is cheaper to produce goods elsewhere. The local market (three million inhabitants) is small, the technology used is simple, and the added value very minimal. The use of foreign labor is no solution to the problem, as the resulting export of capital affects the national currency and increases the prices of goods. The heavy, inefficient, and corrupt state bureaucracy further stifles the mediocre profit-earning capacity of local industry and services. Even Lebanon's much-vaunted banks make more profit abroad, investing in stocks and shares or speculating on exchange rates, than they do in Lebanon. The spread of the use of the Internet for business has reduced the value of Lebanon's physical location. Space, its value and distribution, is no longer at the heart of the global economy.

Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states have all built state-of-the-art ports or container terminals, limiting Beirut's traditional role as the center of Middle East transit. Beirut International Airport has lost its position as a forced technical stop for aircraft on the Europe-Asia route. Planes now fly nonstop to destinations in Southeast Asia, or stop off in the Gulf states. Even Lebanon's network of roads is outside the region's overland transit routes. Trucks from Turkey now pass through Syria to Saudi or Jordanian markets.

The failures of the Middle East peace process and the continuing violence in southern Lebanon after the Israeli withdrawal also affect the prospects for a reconstructed Beirut as a financial center of the new global economy. Israeli banks, with their access to international financial networks and their familiarity with current international financial practices, are serious competitors with Lebanese banks for business even among Arab countries, Arab solidarity notwithstanding.

Internal criticism of the reconstruction has also become more vocal, sparked by the destruction of the historic, architecturally rich district of Wadi Abou-Jmil. When protests did not save the district from being flattened, it seemed that the alliance between the country's power structure and *Solidaire* was confining Lebanese society. At a moment when democratic expectations were being expressed all over the world, especially in

Eastern Europe, the limits imposed on debate over the reconstruction chilled enthusiasm for the project. Beirutis began to realize that the project would not benefit all of the urban population, only a privileged few who would be able to afford luxury residences or new offices. Former landowners felt cheated at having been forced to cede their property at Solidaire-imposed prices, then seeing Solidaire resell the property at wildly inflated rates. The reconstruction of Beirut began to appear as an island of prosperity for the inner circle of the country's ruling class, with the rest of the population left to manage on its own.

Lebanon suddenly realized that the rest of the world had not waited for the Lebanese civil war to end. The global economy now worked according to a different set of rules, and space was no longer an important part of the equation. Beirut's traditional advantages were no longer relevant, particularly in light of its continuing political and social problems, small size, technology gap, and expensive land and labor. Lebanon was no longer a serious competitor in the global marketplace.

The Future of Lebanon's Urban Landscape

Lebanon's urban landscape is again being transformed. As Solidaire has destroyed Beirut's Ottoman-era city center in preparation for reconstruction, historic buildings in the pericentral districts are becoming more valued. The latest craze is to rehabilitate old buildings and either live in them or transform them into chic restaurants or clubs. Remaining historic neighborhoods, as well as individual buildings, are prized for aesthetic, cultural, and social reasons.

The Lebanese urban landscape, however, is increasingly grim. Beirut is rapidly becoming a series of "urban canyons" choked by traffic. Upper-class neighborhoods exert some control on the quality of their environment, but elsewhere the population has to cope with pollution, noise, and lack of road maintenance. In many places in Lebanon, the natural environment has been destroyed, rock quarries disfigure the mountains and the valleys, forests have been burned or leveled, water and air pollution is endemic, and the sea is just a refuse dump.

One Lebanese in two now lives in Greater Beirut, and more than two out of three Lebanese live in cities or large towns. Continuing urban migration is likely to result in an uninterrupted amorphous mass of urbanization extending from Jebail to Sidon, with today's tourist towns expanding into full-time residential areas. Tripoli will overflow into the Koura

along the main roads to Amioun or Zghorta, and Sidon will fill in the space from the Awali to Zahrani, annexing the villages in the foothills. Tyre will fill the sand dunes to the south and any available space on the coast. Similar growth will be seen in the Baalbek and Zahle-Chaura areas.

The current division of the cities into upper-class, middle-class, lower-class, and slum areas will continue. The Palestinian camps will not disappear, unless another solution is found for their inhabitants. The nomad camps around the cities will also exist as long as a low-wage workforce is required to build the urban extensions and infrastructure. The upper-class residential centers will maintain their appeal because of their exclusive character; due to lack of space, very few new ones will be created. The inner cores of villages and towns will slowly be replaced by commercial centers, shopping malls, and residential buildings, thus destroying the remaining remnants of the old architectural and social order.

Around Beirut itself, the commercial and business district that currently spreads between Mkalles and Dbayyeh (the "Beirut Blue Banana") will be consolidated, offering services and products to the local market. In Tripoli, the old *souks* will decline further, or be rehabilitated (the gold *souk* is an example); real commercial activity will take place in the Azmi and Al-Mitain streets, and the city's center will slowly decline. The old center of Sidon, encircled by rapid-transit boulevards, will struggle to maintain some of its character, but land speculation will slowly encroach on the old *souks*, which will be either destroyed or transformed into the ersatz *souks* of Jebail.

This harsh analysis is based on the assumptions that Lebanon's liberal economic system and confessional political system will not change and that Lebanon will not be able to recapture the place that it occupied in the global market in the years following World War II. The successes of the 1950s and 1960s were a consequence of favorable historical circumstances, not of national will and planning. Beirut no longer has any particular place in the hierarchy of world cities, and the global economy has no real need of Beirut.

A totally free market economy like Lebanon's is not conducive to large-scale investment, as the absence of state controls limits the building of the infrastructure necessary for profit making. The lack of a social safety net increases political and social unrest, with the only solution being a repressive regime backed by military force. Such countries are rife with violence, as conflicts in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America have demonstrated. Investors are increasingly wary of countries that are unable to offer social stability without repressive violence. In Lebanon, privati-

zation is the new catch phrase, and the state is further decreasing its minimal social services.

Lebanese are deeply disenchanted with politics. The revolutionary slogans of the 1970s and 1980s, the religious slogans of the later years of the civil war, and the nationalist slogans of the 1990s have disappeared. *Al-balad macheh* is now the object of cynical jokes. In the absence of democratic planning structures such as a Greater Beirut Authority, social fragmentation and political feebleness will continue to characterize the Lebanese urban landscape. The power structure will become increasingly repressive. Social tension will be a way of life, with a privileged few profiting from the uncontrolled system, while the others struggle to survive, fighting for jobs that will go to cheaper foreign labor or to other countries. Emigration from Lebanon will persist, and its cities will slowly decline. Indonesia, the Congo, and Algeria are demoralizing examples of what Lebanon may become.

Conclusion

The Lebanese urban landscape has developed more as a consequence of outside historical influences than of long-term urban planning, a fact that does not bode well for Lebanon's future. The gracious modern Beirut of the Ottoman era was altered under French military rule following World War I. From the 1920s through the 1940s, Lebanon's cities grew unchecked due to massive emigration from rural areas, overseen by religious elites who used the cities to support their traditional rural constituencies. The influx of Palestinian refugees into Lebanon in 1947-48 added permanent refugee camps and fomenting political unrest to Lebanon's urban sprawl but also spurred the growth of Beirut's new financial and commercial center, Hamra.

The prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s was due to Lebanon's position as a cosmopolitan relay point between the oil-producing Middle Eastern countries and the West, at a time when neighboring countries were viewed as unstable and hostile to Western interests. The Lebanese civil war of the 1970s and 1980s, inflamed by regional conflicts, divided Beirut into sectors controlled by competing militias with short-term interests and removed Lebanon from the global marketplace at a time of great technological change. The redevelopment schemes of the 1990s were hampered by the limitations of Lebanon's confessional political system, as well as by a global economy that had bypassed Lebanon and made its location, traditionally an asset, irrelevant.

The Lebanese confessional political system, suited to prosperity, cannot cope with economic fragility or a global economy whose rules and scale of operation far exceed Lebanese know-how. A dogma of “no state interference” continues to hobble Lebanon’s development in an era in which strong governmental services ensure political and economic stability and attract global investment. Because there has been no real improvement in Lebanon’s political system, Lebanon’s reconstruction is doomed to failure.

Lebanon's Second Republic

Prospects for the Twenty-first Century

Edited by Kail C. Ellis

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