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The remaking of Ras Beirut
Displacement beyond gentrification

Mona Khechen

This paper explores Ras Beirut’s current socio-spatial transformations from the perspective of its ‘original’ population, particularly small landowners vulnerable to urban renewal pressures. With reference to their accounts, it illustrates how certain aspects of neighborhood change intersect with Lebanon’s complexities of power, wealth, insecurity and division. While cognizant of the class aspect of urban change, the paper contends that Beirut’s urban restructuring is entrenched in deeper social justices and inequalities than might fit under the rubric of ‘gentrification’. Considering that gentrification, war displacement, and forced migration are one and the same phenomenon for many Lebanese—all captured by the term tahjir (the Arabic term for ‘displacement’) —the paper concludes by questioning the country’s neoliberal model of development. In hindsight, it conceptualizes displacement as a by-product of the ‘manufacture of vulnerability’ in Lebanon.

Key words: Ras Beirut, gentrification, displacement, vulnerability, insecurity, inequality, social justice

Introduction

The storyline of Building X—an ordinary run-down low-rise building in the Hamra area of Ras Beirut (Figure 1)—can be ‘read’ at first sight: many heirs, rent control tenants, low-income or absentee landlords, or some combination of this kind. Its future is also quite predictable: demolition and reconstruction. A spontaneous encounter with one of its owners confirmed my intuitions and illuminated some of the subtleties related to the politics of property in Beirut. As it turns out, the building is owned by one of Beirut’s old Muslim Sunni families who call Ras Beirut their own and who are holding on to their first-comer claims to urban land. After its initial owner died, ownership filtered down to his 6 children then grandchildren, totaling over 20 heirs. Eyad, my informant, is one of the grandchildren. He and his siblings inherited their father’s share including a small family-operated traditional bakery at street level. Eyad does not have a higher-level education. He labours at the bakery to earn a living. It does not take long to

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realize his anger and frustration. He is prop-
erty rich and cash poor. The upper floor of
his family’s building is leased out under
Lebanon’s (old) rent control law and
hardly provides the heirs with any income.
Business has seriously suffered as a result
of competition from Syrian bakeries, that,
to use his words, ‘invaded’ Hamra after
the eruption of the Syrian crisis. The differ-
ent shareholders are in disagreement and
strongly wish to split.

Considering the property’s strategic
location and construction potential
(Figure 2), it was not surprising to learn
that more than 14 different land developers
approached the family who finally reached
an agreement with the one who made the
best offer. These, to use Eyad’s words
again, are ‘two partners, a Muslim and a
Christian, an architect and a businessman’.
After buying the existing tenants out and
demolishing the existing structure, the
developers will finance the construction of
a 14-story luxurious residential tower,
with apartment sizes in the range of 250
square metre. According to Eyad, one of
the new apartments will be his. He plans
to divide it into two, live in one and
furnish the other, then lease it at USD
3000 a month. Although he is barely in
his mid-thirties, he says that after the con-
struction of the new building he wants to
retire and enjoy being a landlord. He con-
cludes that his story will be a success story
since he will continue to reside in Ras
Beirut, unlike many other ‘original’ Ras
Beirutis who had to sell and leave their
area of origin to ‘the strangers’ who are
taking it from them.

In the last decade and a half, hundreds of
old buildings were demolished in Beirut’s
peri-central districts and replaced by taller
and more luxurious ones (Gebara, Khechen,
and Marot 2016). Eyad’s familiar story illus-
trates how the combination of entangled
property rights, stringent rent controls (on
property leased before 23 July 1992), lucra-
tive new construction regulations, and

Figure 1 A typical run-down low-rise building in Ras Beirut. Source: Author.
thriving real estate market have widened the ‘rent gap’ between the actual and potential value of urban land. Especially in Ras Beirut,1 with its favourable location and numerous academic institutions and attractions, market mechanisms of spatial production and consumption have tremendously valorized land prices and instigated, as in some other parts of the city, new-build gentrification processes of urban change.

Despite its critical relevance, the political economy of Ras Beirut’s new construction boom is not, however, the main reason why I have recounted Eyad’s story. Eyad captured my attention in the first place by his overwhelming sense of social injustice and revanchist desire to reclaim his family’s property to

Figure 2  An example of what potentially can be built in the area. Source: Author.
use it as a means of upward social mobility, to transform himself from a working-class baker to a new landlord. Second, I was caught by his first-comer claim to Ras Beirut and his alienation of ‘others’ who have invaded the area and sidelined its rightful owners. Third, I was struck by his sectarian tone, which points to the fact that property politics in the context of a city like Beirut cannot be dissociated from Lebanon’s political and social divisions, which are largely manifested along religious sectarian lines.

I would like to expand on these issues with reference to accounts of other so-called ‘original’ or ‘genuine’ Ras Beirutis (al-sukan al-asliyin), particularly landowners vulnerable to urban redevelopment pressures. I am particularly interested in understanding Ras Beirut’s changing land ownership patterns and social milieu from their perspective. Primarily through social interaction, informal discussions and semi-structured in-depth interviews, complemented by a review of local history texts and oral accounts, I interrogate their struggle against displacement and uprootedness. My inquiry has been guided by a number of framing questions that centre on people’s moral claims to Ras Beirut, perceptions of area transformations, property dispossession practices, and relocation choices when relevant.

I deliberately chose not to confine myself to gentrification-based explanations of the area’s current processes of urban change. This is because, in a conflict-prone multi-confessional society like Lebanon’s, questions of displacement and class, central to gentrification research, need necessarily to be addressed vis-à-vis broader divisions, whether virtual or real, between different income, political, and religious groups. Indeed, the stories that I collected illustrate the presence of more intricate population movements and territorial restructurings than can fit under the gentrification rubric. Besides being urban renewal-induced, Ras Beirut’s current socio-spatial transformations, I contend, stem largely from a country context fraught with social insecurities and highly susceptible to political manipulations and rivalries.

Ras Beirut: brief history, social make-up and vulnerable populations

Initially a sparsely settled wilderness outside the city walls, Ras Beirut (lit. ‘Beirut’s head-land’) has long since become one of Beirut’s most prestigious addresses (Figure 3). The urbanization history of the area is tightly interwoven with the establishment, in the late nineteenth century, and subsequent expansion of the American University of Beirut (AUB) on one of its hilly waterfront sites. Thanks to AUB, Ras Beirut has historically attracted successive waves of settlers, some transient, from various cultural, religious, social, economic, and occupational backgrounds. This earned it the reputation of Beirut’s most diverse and cosmopolitan districts. Like the rest of Beirut, however, Ras Beirut’s urban growth has been both influenced and disrupted by a series of wars and conflicts, with the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) only the most recent of these. Demographic shifts and successive periods of investment and disinvestment of capital have also shaped and reshaped its built environment, physical image and social and economic life.

Notwithstanding its continuous transformation, Ras Beirut remains today a socially mixed area juxtaposing wealth and poverty, although much of the poverty is invisible. According to a recent survey (Kaddour et al. 2014), one-third of the area’s households live below the minimum wage, which was USD 4000 per year at the time of the survey (2009–2010), and 50% live on a yearly income of USD 4000–25,000. A substantial number of families live in poorly maintained buildings, in damp units and/or in units without natural light. The percentage of people with chronic diseases is relatively high and access to health care is relatively low. While tenants of rent-controlled housing units (commonly referred to as ‘old tenants’) are, according to survey results, the most
disadvantaged group in terms of well-being and income status, there is also glaring quantitative evidence of the poor living conditions of many property owners. Further anecdotal evidence suggests that some ‘old tenants’ have assets and are economically better off than their landlords (commonly referred to as ‘old owners’) even if, generally speaking, they are considered a more vulnerable group.

The revanchist sentiments of Lebanon’s ‘old’ property owners are provoked by the fact that old rents, despite successive increases, remained extremely low compared to property leased after 23 July 1992. Feeling that Lebanon’s old rent law has cheated them out of the real value of their property, and burdened them with the responsibility of its upkeep, the great majority stopped investing in the maintenance of their buildings (or parts of), leaving them to deterioration. Some landlords tried to retake their property by force and some by legal, and legally dubious, means. Undoubtedly, some ‘old tenants’ were unjustly evicted in the process. Further evictions and displacements are anticipated in light of a new controversial law that abolishes the rent controls on old leases and gradually raise these leases to market rates. This new law (enacted in June 2014) has provoked serious debate, largely instigated by the ‘old tenants movement’, on the right of vulnerable and lower income groups to the city; and, eventually, put ‘old tenants’ (most of whom strongly oppose it) and ‘old landlords’ (who clearly applaud it) in confrontation with each other.

Irrefutably, not all old landlords have been malicious and not all old tenants have been victims. Interpretations that merely focus on the divide between the two groups are reductionist and misleading. Lebanon’s ‘old’ owner-tenant battle is fundamentally a result of the failure of the Lebanese state to assume its social responsibility in the affordable housing sector, and other social sectors for that matter, and to find adequate and socially just legal solutions to the problems caused by the old rent law. Particularly given the lack of investment in public housing, ‘old owners’ have come to think of themselves as carrying the state’s obligation to provide housing to lower income groups. With this in mind, I want to move on to a broader discussion that draws attention to the overall social insecurities of Lebanon’s low and middle-income groups.

Essentially, since its independence in 1943, Lebanon assumed laissez-faire development

Figure 3  Ras Beirut (Beirut’s headland)—a historically renowned area that enjoys a strategic location and many attractions. Source: Author.
policies that placed great reliance on the private sector. Even the production of affordable housing was left to market mechanisms. Protective measures to secure the right of lower-income groups to this type of housing remained at a bare minimum. There is an enormous dearth of affordable housing in Lebanon today. In view of escalating real estate prices, access to housing has become very challenging for a large segment of the urban population, whether these are evicted tenants that used to hold old leases, first homebuyers or potential new tenants.

The privatization of much of the country’s social services and the increasing prices of food, utilities, education and health care have placed additional overwhelming financial pressure on lower and middle-income groups. Furthermore, ‘double bills’ on electricity and water have burdened many families. Lebanon’s history of war, internal strife and political patronage has complicated the situation. The increased competition over informal and seasonal jobs in the aftermath of the Syrian crisis has further affected the lives and wellbeing of many people, especially since work opportunities remain limited and are increasingly sporadic.

Certainly, many Lebanese middle and low-income earners, whether property owners or tenants, share the unsettling feeling of social insecurity stemming from the country’s harsh realities of unemployment, economic hardship, inadequate public health and education systems, ineffective social assistance programmes, and the absence of job security and retirement guarantees. To meet their basic living and survival needs, the majority remains heavily dependent upon personal earnings and private safety nets, including, in many cases, remittances from relatives abroad (World Bank 2015). Meanwhile, unemployment continues to push large numbers of Lebanese, particularly educated and skilled youth, abroad (World Bank 2014).

Empirical fieldwork in Ras Beirut confirms these toilsome social realities. Lebanon’s current economic situation and high living expenses, place low- and middle-income families, regardless of their tenure status, in a state of vulnerability. For example, a soon-to-be displaced commercial ‘old tenant’ in his early 60s lamented his need to find an alternative job and source of income as he approaches retirement age. Although the compensation he was offered to evict his shop sounded fair, he contended that it was not enough. Quite poignantly, he linked his current sense of ‘loss’ and ‘fear’ to Lebanon’s taxation and social security system which leaves him in a very vulnerable position compared to his neighbour who migrated to Canada, paid taxes there, acquired Canadian citizenship, then returned to Beirut and is now living comfortably on his retirement pension.

If a foreign passport has become a safety net for some, for others personal savings and assets remain the only security against need, illness, and old age. There are numerous old and new stories about the fortunes that ordinary people made through property, and numerous stories of people who sold their assets to cover the costs of basic survival needs. A young underprivileged property owner like Eyad certainly has ambitions. The construction boom around him and the promised affluence of partnering with a land developer who proposes to bring the family’s property to its ‘highest and best use’ ignites his dreams. Presumably, he and his family will benefit from Beirut’s construction boom. The city’s soaring property prices will nonetheless prevent their evicted tenants, and those with similar socio-economic status, from being able to live in the deluxe new building to be constructed on the site of the demolished old structure, in a logic that Peter Marcuse (1985) has termed ‘exclusionary displacement’.

While Eyad may be able to stay in Ras Beirut, the same is not true for many of those in a similar situation. Although not a disadvantaged group per se, Ras Beirut’s small property owners are in fact highly susceptible to ‘displacement pressures,’ another term introduced into gentrification research by Peter Marcuse (1985). With the price of 1
square metre of sellable air rights reaching more than 13 times the current monthly minimum wage salary of USD 450, many families are certainly tempted to sell to, or partner with one of the numerous real estate developers investing in their areas. In either case, their ability to remain in their localities is tested. I would like to illustrate this point with reference to the area of Jal el-Bahr—an area with a predominant population of resident-landowners (Figure 4).

Vulnerability to displacement pressures: the case of Druze Jal el-Bahr

Jal el-Bahr is a hilly area in Ras Beirut’s waterfront district of Ain el-Mreisseh. According to oral accounts, the Druze, a small influential religious group in Lebanon, were its first settlers. Mostly from Mount Lebanon, these early settlers came to Beirut in the 1920s to work at AUB and bought land by *shamlı* (a piece of long cloth that

Figure 4  Ras Beirut’s sub-areas—accentuated are the ones referred to in this paper i.e. Jal el-Bahr and Hamra. Source: Author.
men used to wear around the waist over their sirwal, i.e. traditional trousers) from the handful of feudal families and propertied Beiruti Druze classes. With its proximity to AUB, the area gradually attracted new settlers from different religious and social backgrounds, including foreigners and middle and upper class Palestinian refugees who arrived in Lebanon following the 1948 Palestinian crisis. Similar to many other parts of Beirut and Lebanon, the area’s social and religious demography was, however, dramatically affected by the Lebanese civil war. During the war foreigners fled and many residents, mainly Christian families, moved to other parts of Beirut or abroad after selling their properties, or breaking their rental contracts. The majority never returned.

Those who bought from them were mostly property investors who purchased the land (often large lands or small adjacent parcels) at cheap prices and waited for land prices to rise. Their investment proved worthwhile. Jal el-Bahr’s property values are today among the highest in Beirut (Figure 5). New upper-end residential buildings started to dominate its slopes shortly after the end of Lebanese civil war (Figure 6). With its distinguished waterfront location, the whole area seems now to be witnessing a proliferation of super luxurious residential buildings targeting Lebanon’s powerful elite, members of the Lebanese diaspora and rich Arab nationals—as evident from their huge floor plates, amenities, security systems, and exorbitant selling prices (Figure 7). One metre square of built-up space in buildings with direct sea view can command USD 10,000 (Ramco 2014). And the apartment sizes in such buildings can be in the range of 850 square metres (Figure 8).

The lower part of Jal el-Bahr, which remained rather sub-urban despite the continuous transformations around it, is also

![Figure 5](image-url) With their unblockable sea views and unrestricted building heights, first row waterfront sites are the most attractive sites for new tower development. Source: Jala Makhzoumi.
changing; and its surviving nucleus of Druze families is clearly disappearing. Once major landowners, traditional practices of land division and disposition have long fragmented their lands and reduced them to small property owners (Figure 9). Until recently, the majority lived in modest, incrementally built, low-rise buildings with adjoining traditional home gardens where they planted fruit trees and grew vegetables and herbs (Figure 10). Extensive meetings with the remaining local families of the area (and some of their relatives in the east part of Ain el-Mriesseh), around ten families, revealed their high vulnerability to urban renewal pressures. With nostalgia and pride, some recounted stories of how their ancestors used to own vast tracks of lands that were consequently ‘lost’. Inheritance problems between siblings and family pressures, today as in the past, emerged as the main reasons for the sale of inherited land. The need for cash emerged as another strong motive. Some presented their motive in sacrificial terms and expounded on how they, like their parents before them, were (and still are) forced to sell inherited land to educate their children, to get them married and to help them in the acquisition of residences of their own.

The area’s zoning regulations and the Lebanese building code appeared as other forceful reasons justifying the eventual out-migration of local residents. Some seemed anxious about missing the right moment to sell and, concerned about renovation costs, and whether the municipality decides to impose certain renovation standards in the future. Although many of them are educated and potentially might have access to real estate and legal advice (cf. López-Morales 2015), Jal el-Bahr’s small property owners, unlike the big developers in the area, lack the necessary political power that would allow them to get

Figure 6 Tower development has long dominated Jal el-Bahr’s upper part, unlike its lower part, which long retained a low-rise, lower-density morphology. Source: Author.
‘exceptional’ increases in the permissible built-up density on their plots (Krijnen and Fawaz 2010). Those who own particularly small plots are in an even more vulnerable position, since their existing buildings will eventually be surrounded by high-rises from all sides. Mandatory setbacks and parking provision requirements would, nonetheless, render their small plots undevelopable in the future, unless sold with some adjacent parcel(s). 9

The fragmentation of property rights between many heirs further weakens the bargaining power of small property owners and renders them more vulnerable to the pressures and manipulations of real estate developers and brokers. The high prices that big...
developers are offering to lure them into selling their land are also no guarantee that they can stay in the area. As several people explained, it is extremely difficult to stay unless one does not have children and does not need cash. For example, the head of a family of four children (two sons and two daughters) confided that he was offered USD 2 million for his apartment in an old 3-story family-owned building. But based on his calculations, this amount is relatively low. This is because he plans to divide the money equally among his children, and 2 million means that each child will get USD 500,000. With this money, they clearly cannot afford to stay in the new buildings of Jal el-Bahr. Since they desire to settle in houses of their own, the only way they can lead a comfortable lifestyle and keep some cash on the side is to move outside Beirut.

Those who successfully partnered with one or another of the powerful land developers who approached them and subsequently acquired apartments in the newly constructed buildings on their formerly owned plots are no less vulnerable to displacement pressures. ‘Status incongruity’—a sociological term used ‘to explain the discontent caused by upward mobility’ (Sennett and Cobb 1972, 20–21)—is the crucial reason here. With their insecure income, unsteady jobs, and simple lifestyles, the local residents do not find comfort in the new super-luxurious apartments. Some who moved to such apartments reconsidered their position in favour of cash. One example is the case of three brothers who gave their land to a wealthy developer in exchange for two apartments and an office each in the new building that was constructed on the site they formerly owned; and who, interestingly, still maintain possession of a small strip of land, facing the new building, where they grow vegetables and raise chickens. All of them have now either sold

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**Figure 8** The gigantic floor areas of new towers in the area. Source: Author.
their apartments or leased them out after being drained by the costs (including municipal taxes and maintenance and service costs) incurred during the period they lived in these apartments. One brother, as a neighbour disclosed, is now collecting USD 70,000 in annual rents. He himself has relocated to a rented apartment in a cheaper part of Ras Beirut where he is paying only USD 20,000 a year.

Neighbourhood livability is another important concern and a key factor leading to further out-migration. Although some locals described the new construction as having positively contributed to the improved image of their area and its security, they also talked about recent transformations in negative terms. Older people especially compared Ras Beirut before the war and now: What it (nicely) used to be and what it has (sadly) become. While they mainly blamed the Lebanese civil war for the loss of the old neighbourhood way of life and community spirit, they also elaborated on current realities. Some spoke about Beirut’s and Ras Beirut’s increasing physical and social problems: dirt, theft, crime, prostitution, traffic, noise, and general ‘ugliness’. Some referred to a general category of hooligan youth who have invaded Hamra and the waterfront promenade area (The Corniche) and degraded them. In most accounts, however, the ‘stranger’ emerged as a source of all social ills and a reason justifying their desire to sell and move to an area with better living conditions outside Beirut.

Strangers/locals narratives

The figure of ‘the stranger’, a recurrent theme in the accounts of the local residents of Jal
el-Bahr, and other Ras Beirutis, on the current transformations of their areas merits further reflections. In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett identifies two different types of stranger: (1) the outsider or the intruder who appears in an area where members share a strong sense of identity and is immediately spotted out as different in terms of ethnic or social background and habits, and (2) the unknown or the alien who appears in a certain place among people who have a blurred or unclearly defined sense of group identity (Sennett 1977, 48). With their collective claim to the area, Ras Beirut’s local families speak in terms of encounters with the first type of stranger that Sennett describes. Yet within this category they seem also to be talking about two further kinds of strangers: (1) the ones who moved in, outnumbered them and took over Ras Beirut’s street life (the visible group); and (2) the ones buying property and ‘displacing’ them (the invisible group). Notably, the identity of both types of strangers is politicized and polarized vis-à-vis their own identity.

Just as crucially, the stranger that local Ras Beirutis talk about can be thought about with Georg Simmel’s figure of the stranger (1908). Unlike the outsider who comes today and leaves tomorrow, the stranger in Ras Beirut is perceived as someone who has come to stay, and who thereby has opened the eyes of the local population to their own social insecurities. And like Simmel’s stranger, the strangers that invaded Ras Beirut are ‘not really perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type’. They are portrayed as people of ‘alien origin’—alien to Lebanon, Beirut, and the religious sectarian groups who first settled in the area. They are the Syrians, the Muslim Shia’a, the Arab nationals and the Americans, as represented by AUB.

I will begin with the Syrians, whose tremendous human inflow into Lebanon since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 has caused fevered social tensions. Security
incidents in some refugee camps have worsened the situation and perpetuated a commonplace view that associates Syrians with crime, terrorism and bad behaviour. As almost everywhere in Lebanon, the Syrians who came to Ras Beirut have become a scapegoat for all sorts of urban problems. Even affluent Syria incomers are not safe from accusations. They are blamed for escalating real estate prices and taking over the area, and the whole of Lebanon, from the Lebanese. As a housewife in her late sixties put it:

‘Those who came will never go. It will take a revolution to get them out. The Syrians are now sharing everything with us: livelihood and work. The Syrians are now displacing us from our area, taking our heritage and roots in this land… We are compassionate with them but not at our own cost… Our children are leaving the country to work abroad… The country is not ours anymore. It is the whole of Lebanon; we are losing it. We are unable to protect it.’

The Muslim Shia’a, considered outsiders to Ras Beirut and Beirut in general, are no less accused of taking Ras Beirut from its rightful owners, not only by their sheer numbers but also by their money and political power. The ‘Shia’a demographic expansion’ and ‘the Shia’a encroachment’ on areas not belonging to them are phrases frequently heard in descriptions of this group. Commenting on the fact that many of the new big developers in Jal el-Bahr and other parts of Beirut are from the Shia’a community, a father (in his late sixties) and son (in his early forties) expounded on what sounded like an orchestrated statement:

‘It’s now the Shia’a who are controlling the country. They are the wealthy group. They benefit from external political money and support. They have a political plan oriented towards buying land. They are not merely investing in Ras Beirut for speculative reasons. They also want to reside in Beirut to prove that it is not only for the Sunnis.’

Statements, such as ‘they are rich but not classy’ or ‘they have more money but not a better culture’ are not uncommon. The ‘they’ here is not limited to affluent Shia’a but includes, depending on the speaker, rich Syrians and Arab nationals from Gulf countries, as well as Lebanese politicians and influential figures. For example, discontent about the strict security measures around the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (located in the upper part of Jal el-Bahr), some Ras Beirutis, have complained specifically about the Saudi takeover of Beirut and Lebanon in general, in view of their political influence, purchasing capacity and role in inflating property prices. Meanwhile, certain Muslim Sunnis (including holders of dual Lebanese-Saudi citizenship prime minister Rafic Hariri and his family) are not free from these accusations in view of their controversial land investments in Beirut, especially given that they are originally not from Beirut.

Of course the ‘invasion’ of Ras Beirut by ‘strangers’ is not new. Since the establishment of AUB in the late nineteenth century, the area attracted new-comers of all sorts. Interestingly, however, the strangers who settled there before the eruption of the 15-year civil war are not considered by some local families to be strangers in the same way as those who arrived in more recent years. This, as the same housewife mentioned earlier explained, is because those who came before the war, including Palestinian refugees, did not come all at once. Their arrival was gradual and the pace of urban change was slower and less dramatic than it is now. Oral history accounts confirm this view and emphasize the social bonds that were formed between local families and those who settled among them in the pre-war period. Whether early or new-comers, they are, however, identified as strangers if and when they start to compete with the locals over jobs, land, and/or power. For instance, one evicted commercial tenant derogatorily described the Palestinian husband of her (Lebanese) landlord as someone who fled Palestine with his parents in the 1948 ‘without even an underwear to hide his nakedness’ and is now playing the role of a powerful
landlord. Such remarks contravene the commonplace claims that idealize and romanticize the good life that Ras Beirut’s diverse social groups shared in the past.

Despite their historical presence in the area, Americans do not escape reproach. While most Ras Beirutis agree on AUB’s constructive role in enhancing the image of Ras Beirut, attitudes diverge regarding the university’s geographic expansion. Assertions of the presence of the local community in the area long before AUB was established abound (Abunnasr 2013). Local historian Isam Shebaro, in his book on Ain el-Mrieisseh (2000), blames AUB for amputating Jal el-Bahr from Ain Mreisseh and for exploiting and dispossessing the original residents. Furthermore, he alludes to an ‘American project’ that continues to destroy Ras Beirut, mainly the area of Ain el-Mreiseh (Shebaro 2000, 226). In support of his argument, Shebaro refers to the accounts of the residents of the al-Mouheb/al-Tannir alley, a predominately Muslim Sunni neighbourhood northeast of AUB campus wall, who a couple of decades ago openly condemned AUB’s expansionist policies and accused the university of having purposefully installed a ‘deadly chimney’ (in reference to the university’s power plant) to aid in ‘raping their property bit by bit.’ This, as it seems, fuelled revanchist sentiment among the ‘native’ Sunni residents of the area:

‘I am seriously thinking of replacing my building with a mosque . . . It is only then the American expansion will stop and the buildings of the American University will start vibrating on the sound of ‘allah akbar’ instead of the buildings of our alley vibrating on the roar of the generators of the [university’s] power plant.’ (Local resident quoted in Shebaro 2000, 211)\(^{10}\)

The story of the generator is telling at another level. According to Shebaro, it is not only the poor residents of the al-Mouheb/al-Tannir alley who were affected by the emissions of AUB’s power plant but also the residents of the nearby luxury tower. This latter group proposed to file a lawsuit against AUB on behalf of both the tower and the alley residents and took it upon themselves to bear all financial expenses associated with the case. The residents of the alley were, however, furious at the suggestion that these newcomers (the strangers) dare to think that they (the original residents) needed someone to pay for them (Shebaro 2000). More than feelings of wounded pride, this incident hints, on the one hand, at the vast social distance between the rich and poor residents of the area who remain alienated from each other despite the short physical distance that separates them. On the other hand, it suggests a double-sided claim of superiority. By virtue of being first in the area, local residents assume primacy over their wealthy neighbours, and by virtue of their money, tower residents assume the same over them.

**Property and politics**

First-comer claims are particularly important to consider in this context. Local families’ stories about how their ancestors settled the area and how they used to own vast tracts of land in the past can be interpreted, to use the words of anthropologist Carola Lentz (2013), as ‘moral narratives’ that are instinctively deployed to legitimize their collective territorial ownership of Ras Beirut. By extending the notion of ownership to the whole religious community, however (such as saying Beirut is originally for the Sunnis, or Jal el-Bahr is originally for the Druze), property claims take on certain political connotations.

As is well known, Lebanon has a confessional political system. Political power is divided among the country’s diverse denominational groups and religious identity plays a cardinal role in national politics, administrative appointments, and everyday life. Even the different areas of the Lebanese territory are identified with and are closely tied to certain sectarian communities. Although Ras Beirut has historically been reputed as a socially and culturally mixed and diverse
area, it has never been shielded from the country’s sectarian clashes and political schism. Historical accounts allude to an early rivalry over property acquisition between the different groups who settled in Ras Beirut (Khalaf and Kongstad 1974). This rivalry, however, has been overshadowed by a dominant discourse that underscores Ras Beirut’s religious diversity and peaceful cohabitation, often credited to AUB. Today, the speed and scale of area transformations seem to have awakened sectarian strife over land. Unlike those who only blame ‘the stranger’ and ‘the outsider’, there are those who blame native Sunni and/or Druze Ras Beirutis for failing to cherish and safeguard the property inherited from their parents and grandparents and protect it from the religious other.

This is for instance the position of Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) who shares the concerns of his constituents regarding the Shia’a expansion in the ‘Druze areas’ of Mount Lebanon. Although he seems quite accepting of the fact that Beirut is not the exclusive property of one religious group, he, with particular reference to Jal el-Bahr, blames the Druze for being the ones who sold their land there to the Shia’a: ‘We are the ones who sold them the land… There is almost nothing left of Jal el-Bahr for the Druze’. Empirical investigations confirm his remark. Even some of those who seemed most attached to their old house and those who clearly understood urban problems along ethnic and religious sectarian lines admitted that in the end they would do what is in their best economic interest. The nationality and the religion of the potential buyer did not emerge as one of their key concerns.

In reflecting on such positions, one real estate broker, a middle-aged Ras Beirut Druze who decided to move to Mount Lebanon after selling his inherited property in Jal el-Bahr a few years ago, explained that it is relatively easy for the Druze to sell their land in Beirut because their turf is Mount Lebanon, not Beirut. The same, however, is not true for the Sunnis, as Beirut is their turf. Still, he noted that even the strictest Sunnis would feel conflicted about selling a vacant plot of land, or an entire old building, to someone from the Shia’a community. On the one hand, they would resent selling to ‘a stranger’ Shia’a in fear of possible connections to Hezbollah or concerns over the potential building of a Shia’a mosque or husayniyah (hall for religious events and funerals) in their area. On the other hand, they would not mind selling to a well-reputed land developer from the Shia’a community if the deal is financially good for them.

Such responses are hardly surprising. The question of property is highly politicized in Lebanon and cannot be isolated from local politics and regional processes of urban restructuring, as perceived by different groups. The ‘othering’ of new-comers by those who claim precedence in the area is certainly influenced by a broader political debate that views investments in the real estate sector, in Beirut and throughout Lebanon, as a mechanism that allows one religious-political group to penetrate, and eventually take over, areas that ‘belong’ to other groups (Bou Akar 2011). Paradoxically, however, resentment at the religious community level to selling the community’s lands to others is not matched by resentment on the part of those community members who hold the actual title to land.

Motives related to money and need certainly play a key role in influencing the decisions of individual families to sell and leave their areas. Still, the re-locational choices of the great majority are not free from invocations of religious group identity. This is not only the case of the small Druze property owners of Jal el-Bahr but is something endemic among the Lebanese. Indeed, the locational choices of many Lebanese involve trade-offs between geographic centrality, and financial, social, and human security considerations. On-going and looming regional conflicts, the growing fundamentalism in the region, and allegedly
parallel political projects to redraw the map
of the Middle East, are certainly reasons
that influence people’s decisions on where
to live. One needs to look at the changing
religious demographic map of Lebanon to
assess and understand how sectarian religious
identities are redrawing territorial divisions
(Nasr 2003; IFPO 2008). While these larger
questions go beyond the scope of this paper,
the sectarian segmentation of urban space,
and geographies of conflict and security, can
be traced at the more micro-scales of neigh-
bourhood transformations and individual
and family biographies.

Gentrification and other displacements

Notwithstanding the varying definitions and
debatable expansion of the term beyond its
initial conventional meaning, gentrification,
as many critical scholars argue (e.g. Clark
2005; Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008), is a politi-
cally-charged concept associated with: (1)
class-based displacement, where an existing
group of land users is displaced and replaced
by a more powerful group; and (2) social
polarization and systematic inequalities
related to the very nature of capital-driven
processes of urban restructuring. This is cer-
tainly happening in Ras Beirut. The area,
like the whole city, is undergoing a massive
urban renewal process. Exorbitant real
estate prices are leading to direct, indirect
and exclusionary acts of displacement.
Those who are buying in the luxurious and
super-luxurious new buildings obviously
belong to a group of much higher income
and status than previous occupiers.

Despite its relevance, however, the concept
of gentrification does not fully capture the
complexity and plurality of Ras Beirut’s
urban transformations or the broader patterns
of residential restructuring that are taking
place at the national level. As the case of Jal
el-Bahr shows, no one is forcing small resi-
dent-landowners to sell their land or to relo-
cate from their area. Most of them are doing
it deliberately and are getting good money
out of it. Especially in cases that involve mul-
tiple owners, family conflicts can be serious
and property sales can be desired as something
lucrative as well as liberating.

Still, the decision of small property
owners to leave their area of origin cannot
simply be presented as voluntary displace-
ment. Their individual choices and physical
movement are rather ‘[socially] produced
and given meaning within relations of
power’ (Cresswell 2010, 331). With their
limited social protection guarantees, they
are in a constant state of anxiety. Their
fears, survival needs and ambitions are also
putting them in a state of inner conflict. Many
are torn between attachments to their old houses and neighbourhoods and
prospects of leaving. Ultimately, however,
their sense of attachment is being negotiated,
sold and sacrificed in the face of their desire
for social security and financial prosperity.
They are forced to bargain on their geo-
graphical location and sell it to those who
present the best offer.

While no one can deny the class aspect of
urban change, people’s locational and re-
locational choices show that it is not only
land and real estate markets that are redraw-
ing territorial divisions. It is also religious
identity and the mounting culture of fear,
from the stranger and religious other, which
is perpetuated by popular and media dis-
courses. The unaffordability of Beirut’s
central areas is leading to the polycentric
growth of Beirut’s metropolitan area in
ways that reassert the country’s fragmenta-
tion. Beirut, nonetheless, continues to be an
employment centre for the great majority of
Lebanon’s working age population. Concen-
trated poverty also continues to grow inside
Beirut and its expanding metropolis. Within
Ras Beirut itself different areas are transform-
ing in different ways. By virtue of its water-
front location, high land value, and zoning
regulations, Jal el-Bahr, like the rest of Ras
Beirut’s waterfront, is turning into an exclu-
sive area for the rich. The same is not true
for Hamra, where processes of urban
renewal and urban degradation, social
homogenization and heterogenization, are simultaneously taking place.

Interestingly, the high value of urban land in Ras Beirut does not always deny lower and middle-income groups the right to access and use the new spaces of capital (cf. López-Morales 2015). Those with money and power are creatively capturing the dollars of those at the bottom of society. Actually, some of the large relatively new shopping centres in Hamra primarily target low and middle-low income groups as consumers. With the Syrian refugee crisis, the area is also increasingly attracting a daytime population of informal street vendors and beggars who commute there on a daily basis to plead for help from others more privileged.

Despite this apparent social diversity, however, Ras Beirut’s ‘social geometry’ is in fact ‘polymorphous and fractured’, to borrow Soja’s (2000) words. With its fortified and constantly surveilled islands of opulence, its emerging spatial form is more of a mosaic of adjacent spaces that mirror Beirut’s and Lebanon’s growing socio-economic cleavages and inequalities. It is this surge of inequality that one needs to question. According to the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook (2014), Lebanon is one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of wealth distribution. Around two-thirds of Lebanese are estimated to live below the poverty line while 0.3% of the population own around half of the country’s estimated wealth. Dramatically increasing living expenses, uneven geographic development, failed public services, political clientelism, rampant corruption, and the general sense that national assets are dominated by the country’s powerful elites, all help to explain public discontent.

The combination of all these reasons is leading many low- and middle-income Lebanese to believe that there is a conspiracy plan to mass evict them—in the sense of causing their exodus from the country. Quite noticeably, in the midst of their stories of urban renewal-induced displacements, many people divert to talk about war displacement and forced emigration. To them, these different types of displacement are not distinct phenomena. It is worth noting that the word ‘gentrification’ does not have an equivalent in the Arabic language. In colloquial Lebanese, people use the word tahjir, which literally means ‘forced displacement’ to describe how the current urban-renewal process and escalating real estate prices are affecting vulnerable groups. But the word tahjir is also used in reference to war and conflict induced displacement, and would instinctively be understood as such. People also often use the term yuhajjir (to displace someone by force) instead of the term yuha¯jir (to emigrate) to emphasize that migratory flows from Lebanon are mostly happening by force, not by will. The way Ras Beirut’s area representative (Mukhtar) put it is very telling in this regard:

‘Those who left during the war . . . and those who are now selling their property to land developers and leaving, are all the same. They were forced to move. They left and someone else came and took their place . . . ’

Concluding reflections: displacement beyond gentrification

As this paper attempted to explain, gentrification in Beirut is deeply embedded in wider social divisions and injustices. While a focus on class, income, property and tenure can help us to understand certain critical dynamics of neighbourhood and urban change, such a framework does not capture the broader complexities of power, wealth, insecurity and division that shape the city. Be it directly, indirectly or in exclusionary terms, it is not only poor tenants who are being priced out and displaced from central areas. Many low and middle-income property owners are also highly vulnerable to displacement pressures. The undeniable class aspect of urban restructuring is enmeshed here with other aspects that
derive from Lebanon’s political system, religious make-up, and increasing confessional polarization.

Ras Beirut’s urban transformations cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader displacements and socio-economic restructuring taking place at city and country level. Since the onset of the civil war ‘Lebanon has been the scene of massive internal population displacements that have totally redrawn [its] social geography’ along sectarian lines (Nasr 2003, 148). Today, more than twenty-five years after the end of the war, religious and political affiliations continue to shape the country’s landscape and redraw its lines of division. Concurrently, the inadequacy of Lebanon’s social services and social protection system, and the failure of its rentier economy to create adequate and lasting job opportunities, continues to act as a push factor leading many Lebanese to emigrate and seek havens in distant lands.

This reality calls the neoliberal economic development model that Lebanon adopted in its post-war period into question. Combined with the country’s ‘consociational democracy’ and patron-client politics, this model has not only privileged the interests of political leaders and influential factions over public interests. It also succeeded in playing on people’s needs to facilitate their subordination (Saghieh 2015a). Building on Saghieh’s discussion and borrowing his notion of ‘manufacturing vulnerability’ (Saghieh 2015b), I posit that displacement, with its multiple local interpretations, is a by-product of the manufacture of vulnerability in Lebanon (Khechen 2015). Indeed, as many Lebanese would agree, Lebanon’s current social and spatial development policies have exposed many individuals and families and led to their forced mobility, whether internally or beyond national borders. The voice that I however recall most is that of a young woman who survived a ‘death boat’ tragedy in late 2015. Refusing to show her face to the TV camera, she recounted how she sold her assets to pay the smugglers who helped her cross the Mediterranean and how she destroyed her Lebanese passport, which she said is not proud to hold. She even proclaimed that she would attempt to flee Lebanon again to another country that recognizes her basic human rights and needs.

The number of Beirut’s (and Lebanon’s) displaced populations is likely to increase if human-centred responses to the country’s growing social, economic, and environmental crises are not put in place. What kind of response is certainly contingent on the way we understand the growing phenomenon of displacement. I believe that curbing the escalation of real estate prices (through taxation systems, land development policies, and anti-eviction measures) in order to keep housing within the reach of middle and lower income groups is essential but not enough. What is needed is an integrated, coherent and implementable social policy framework and socially-motivated economic development plans that reinforce people’s basic rights, especially the rights to housing, social security, health care, free education, full and productive employment and decent work. Unless this happens, Beirut’s and Lebanon’s social divisions and inequalities are likely to grow and intensify. The repercussions will certainly be grave. More than anything the notions of state and citizenship, at the national as well as at the urban scale, are here at stake.

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Notes

1 Ras Beirut (literary Beirut’s headland) comprises the two city districts of Ras Beirut and Ain el-Mreisseh. This paper refers to the area in its broader geographic sense.

2 Information was collected through social interaction and in-depth interviews with people living and/or working in the area, mostly ‘original’ residents, some from the same nuclear or extended family. Some families and individuals also disclosed information about their neighbours. All social interaction and interview material quoted in text is translated from Arabic. Giulia Guadagnoli assisted in the interviews.

3 In addition to published texts, the interviews by Maria Abunnasr for the AUB Oral History Project provided valuable information.

4 The old rent law allowed landlords to reclaim their properties for family needs or to demolish and reconstruct, provided they compensate their tenants.

5 The ‘double bills’ refers to the fact that many households are compelled to pay one bill for public services that fall short of delivery, and another bill for private providers of these services who step in to fill the gap.

6 The geographic boundary of Jal el-Bahr is blurred and the name Jal el-Bahr is not commonly used today in reference to it, except by the initial local families and long-time residents of the area.

7 Interview with Ghassan el-Kadi and Bushra Oud el-Kadi (1 April 2014) conducted by Maria Abunnasr as part of the AUB Oral History Project.

8 The classwork of AUB students (2014) on Jal el-Bahr (Sector 35 Urban Design Studio) provides an overview of area history and transformations: https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/handle/10938/10277.

9 A working research paper carried out under the ‘Gentrification and Urban Change in Ras Beirut Project’ by A. Saksouk (2015) provides illustrative examples in this regard.


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