Introduction

It was a hot day in the hills surrounding the Bisri Valley in South Lebanon. A friend and I had joined a one-day cycling trip organised by a Beirut-based group with whom we sometimes cycled on a Thursday night. Having left Beirut in the morning, by that point we had spent about three hours riding up and down a series of dirt tracks that criss-crossed the landscape across pine forest, olive groves and bare hilltops. My friend, a better cyclist than I am, was well ahead, something that gave me a chance to make conversation with other participants. As far as I could tell, most of the other attendees were Lebanese, albeit of different ages, and many lived like us in the capital city but enjoyed leaving the hustle and bustle of Beirut behind at the weekend to appreciate the more bucolic and verdant landscape of the countryside. As we cycled slowly along the rough terrain, a woman, seemingly in her mid-thirties, began making small talk with me and asked what had brought me to the country. When I explained that I was researching Beirut's green public spaces, she looked pointedly at me. 'What [are you researching]? That there's none?' she asked. Even though she wore sunglasses I could see puzzlement painted across her face. I was not surprised by my fellow cyclist's reaction. Over fifteen months of fieldwork in Beirut, I was repeatedly met with bafflement just about every time I mentioned my research topic. At the time of my study, between 2014 and 2015, a relatively small number of green, publicly owned spaces existed in Beirut. Most were small and in dire need of maintenance by authorities, specifically the local municipal council. Worse, the most notable of these spaces, the city's largest park, Horsh Beirut, had itself

been inaccessible for over a decade, as the municipality insisted on keeping it closed to the public. At 0.3 square kilometres, the Horsh might not seem like much to readers used to large extensions of urban green space found elsewhere in the world – such as New York City's Central Park (3.4 km²), Singapore's East Coast Park (1.85 km²) or London's Hyde Park (1.4 km²). However, even a few hectares of trees were an unmatched source of greenness and peacefulness in the busy, cement-dominated landscape of Beirut. It is in fact difficult to overstate how little greenery is found in the city; even the coastline, which is considered to be Beirut's unofficial natural reserve, is largely rocky. These circumstances explain why my fellow cyclist was so baffled that I would be studying something that, from the point of view of many, barely existed. The lack of available green spaces only aggravated the stifling urban environment that Beirut offered to its residents, which, as the book will detail, was characterised by failing infrastructure, unreliable energy and water provision, and constant road congestion. While many of my interlocutors cherished the opportunity to live in a lively and dynamic cultural and political hub such as Beirut, in concrete terms living in the capital city was a challenging, costly and suffocating experience. Weekend trips to natural areas such *al jabal* ('the mountain', meaning the Lebanon range), much like our cycling excursion, were one way for Beirutis of sufficient means to escape the city's 'cement jungle', as a friend called it, to breath and relax. Other strategies included visiting a second home in the family's village of origin or making the most of the country's many private resorts. Other inhabitants who were unable to afford day trips and second homes were forced to make do with the scarce resources at their disposal in Beirut. Even in the generally difficult conditions that Beirut dealt to all its inhabitants, the city was suffocating for some more than others.

If most residents seemed painfully aware of the dire state of green public spaces in the capital city, some were also organising to change the situation. A growing number of collectives, networks and nongovernmental organisations had in fact begun to tackle the issue, from different perspectives. Between 2014 and 2015, their efforts were beginning to bear fruit, in that the issue of public space was becoming an important part of public debate, frequently featuring in national and international news reports. Contestation was mounting around authorities' decision-making in matters of urban governance, and not only in regard to green space. Beirutis who did not respond to my research topic with surprise were usually aware of this simmering trouble and tended to rather react more positively: '[public space] is so important', they often agreed instead. From initiatives to rethink public transport to mobilisations to save the littoral from privatisation and redevelopment, Beirut was bubbling with activity around urban issues in the mid-2010s. While these projects varied from one another in terms of focus, methods, and

objectives, they all shared one fundamental, if rhetorical, question: *Beirut la min?* which may be translated as 'To whom does Beirut belong?' As the following chapters will outline, this question was at once rhetorical – to underscore inhabitants' lack of a say in governance – and programmatic, as campaigners were determined to force institutions to change their course. This book concentrates on one of these many initiatives, the campaign to permanently reopen the city's largest publicly owned park, Horsh Beirut.[1] The chapters that follow are thus first and foremost an ethnographic examination of the mechanisms through which authorities enacted and justified the closure of the Horsh, as well as campaigners' efforts to restore public access to it. Since space is shaped by power and politico-economic arrangements, this book – as the Horsh campaign itself – is about more than just the reopening of a park. Campaigners' questioning of the Horsh's closure itself questioned the arrangements of neoliberal and sectarian governance in Beirut and, by extension, in Lebanon. Following my interlocutors, the book asks fundamental questions about the public, as a type of space, property and social domain; in a context where the public is fragmented along sectarian lines and private interest is paramount: what does it take for the public to emerge meaningfully, beyond and above the letter of the law, and to be sustained? And, crucially, what part do ordinary citizens have to play, or perhaps can play, in this process, especially vis-à-vis public institutions? This book is, then, an ethnography of the profound ways in which residents and campaigners contested authorities' decision-making and reimagined their city and country in significative yet emergent, fragmented and piecemeal ways – where visions of a new Beirut and Lebanon 'otherwise' came into existence day after day, in the process of dissenting, organising and campaigning together.

Parks, Space, Property

Open space in urban settings is typically pictured as a site of encounter, meeting and exchange, a perspective visibly influenced by the notion of the city as 'the natural home of difference' (Sennett 1990, see also Goheen 1998; Smith and Low 2013). The physical nature and concreteness of public space are of prime importance, as they serve as assembly points where diversity becomes visible and strangers mingle (Gaffikin et al. 2010; Gieryn 2000; Madanipour 2003). Public space in this perspective refers broadly to spaces that can be freely accessed by inhabitants: streets and squares, pavements and parks, promenades and beaches. People of different constituencies or 'publics' (Fraser 1990) physically coexist in these spaces, if fleetingly. While public space may bear the potential to foster tolerance amongst strangers, it can also become a site of contestation as different constituencies might dispute the

allocation or control of space and resources. Issues of identity and belonging thus intertwine with issues of difference and coexistence, which may also result in the outbreak of violent confrontation. These themes are crucial to scholarship of public space in post-civil war Beirut, which has been explored as a divided city alongside other urban centres such as Nicosia, Jerusalem, Belfast or Sarajevo (see, for instance, Calame and Charlesworth 2011; Nagle 2018). Public spaces (*al masāḥat al ʻama* in colloquial Arabic) were the first to turn into battlegrounds during the early phases of the Civil War (1975–1990), as militias attempted to gain control of avenues, roads and squares that stood between neighbourhoods they controlled and neighbourhoods under enemy rule. Public spaces changed from being places of leisure, movement and connection to sites of danger and separation (Kassir 2010; Khalaf 2006) between increasingly homogeneous sectarian areas. Beauchard (2012) describes Beirut as a city that 'opens and closes' according to the ways in which politics and identity intersect, thus affecting the fragmentation or reconstitution of public spaces as physical loci where citizens meet or tensions and disputes manifest. Writing about the city in the early 1990s, Daniel Genberg (2002: 250) reports the anxiety experienced by his interlocutors when considering crossing the wartime demarcation line along Damascus Road:

> While it is true that people are using all of the city more and more, I encountered quite a few people who had not yet been to 'the other side' or felt uncomfortable when going there. The public spaces of the street, intersections, cafes and squares are thus not completely open, in the sense that they have become marked as being public spaces for a certain group.

The legacy of this intense reconfiguration of urban space still bears heavily on the city (Bou Akar 2018; Deeb 2006; Deeb and Fawaz 2013; Hafeda 2018; Nucho 2016), while the system of political sectarianism, which the Taif Agreement was supposed to eliminate, has instead been re-entrenched.[2] Public space in postwar Beirut is thus commonly assessed in terms of its ability or inability to foster reconciliation and social cohesion. Underlying much of this scholarship is the notion that public spaces are necessary for reconciliation or that they may serve at the very least as an index of the state of social cohesion. For instance, Barakat and Chamussy (2002: 281) reflect: 'mosques and churches stand in close proximity, communities cohabit, but do they mix?' Similarly, Christine Delpal (2001: 81) argues that the Corniche, the famous seafront promenade, is perhaps the only 'real public space' in Beirut, in virtue of its being the only site where 'publics blend and identities blur' (see also Khalili 2016). In this literature, the privatisation of public space, which keeps all but the wealthy away from parks and squares, is therefore read primarily as an obstacle to reconciliation. A significant strand of

scholarship on the post-civil war reconstruction of the *balad*, the Downtown area, for instance, is concerned with the negative effect that the demise of the socially mixed city centre of the pre-war years may have on the healing of wartime wounds (Larkin 2010; C. Nagel 2000; J. Nagle 2017, 2018, 2020; see also Mady 2018). The new city centre, known as Solidere from the name of the company that rebuilt it, was reconstituted as a commercial neighbourhood rather than as the beating heart of a diverse and multicommunal city. Public space analysed through the prism of sectarianism and reconciliation has become something of a privileged 'zone of theory' (Abu Lughod 1989) in urban studies of Beirut.

Other scholars have expanded the scope of these critiques to include class and socio-economic inequalities in their analysis of the privatisation of public space. These voices argue that Solidere portrays a sanitised version of Beirut's history that preserves mere aesthetic references to its past (Haugbolle 2010) while serving as an elite project of neoliberal reconstruction that caters to the wealthy while ousting the poor from the city centre through both eviction and beautification (Davie 1993; El Hibri 2009; Ghandour and Fawaz 2010; Makarem 2015; Sawalha 2010). Sanitised and securitised, urban space may also become a space of exclusion on the basis of race, class and nationality, *as well as* sect (Fawaz, Harb and Gharbieh 2012). This focus has grown in the past decade, with scholars and activists frequently discussing it in connection to Henri Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the right to the city (Fawaz 2009; Mady 2021; Saksouk-Sasso 2015). Indeed, Beirut is becoming increasingly inhospitable to the lower and middle classes due to the skyrocketing prices of liberalised rents (Bekdache 2014, 2015) and living costs. Meanwhile, infrastructural capacity is limited and must be subsidised by costly private provision.[3] Green spaces have likewise become scarcer and hence more valuable, particularly for those inhabitants unable to afford luxury private restaurants, beach resorts and second homes in the mountain. In Beirut as in other cities, instances of discontent and contestation over the use, planning and management of green space have multiplied. Much of this growing body of research tends to approach phenomena of urban privatisation across the globe through one of two lenses: public space or the commons. Yet, the privatisation of the Horsh fits awkwardly in both these frameworks. Below, I consider each in turn in order to trace an analytical way forward.

Public Space

Often, the question of who has the right to occupy urban space is not a purely philosophical one, as contestation over the privatisation of public space frequently hinges on questions of concrete legal ownership. It is not uncommon for public space, and green space within it, to be technically

privately owned but ordinarily accessed and freely used by city dwellers (Blomley 2004; Mitchell 1995; Mitchell and Staeheli 2016). Malls, plazas, gardens and even pavements may be privately owned by commercial or corporate actors and can be tightly controlled – or, indeed, closed off – at will, excluding some or all members of the public. Indeed, their privateness only becomes apparent once concrete privatisation takes place, a process that may itself become highly contested, as the legal rights of owners are pitted against the social rights of ordinary inhabitants. In Beirut, the most valuable public spaces used by the public for recreational and subsistence activities are often informal public spaces, empty lots and small parcels of vacant land, which are not necessarily publicly owned but can be freely used by residents. The case of Dalieh of Raouche is epitomical of such circumstances. Dalieh of Raouche is a rocky peninsula located on the southern coast of Beirut and one of Beirutis' few access points to the sea. Although the land is privately owned, for decades the area was freely accessible and was thus at the heart of the city's social life, as different groups of inhabitants visited it to fish, learn to swim, do yoga, picnic and smoke *arghile*, dive from the cliffs and celebrate festivities. As Abir Saksouk-Sasso (2015) has argued, Dalieh constituted a 'space for the public', akin to an urban common and unburdened by the owners' wishes, characterised by a kind of communal sovereignty. Dalieh's publicness and openness, however, were threatened as soon as the owners decided to exercise their legal rights to redevelop the land, thus closing off Dalieh to the public and also attempting to appropriate a section of public property in the process. We will encounter Dalieh again in the course of the book.

While actors on the ground struggle to have their claims recognised in the face of black-and-white regulatory and planning regimes (Fawaz 2017a), scholars have used these conflicts over rights to property as an opportunity to question and denaturalise liberal notions of property themselves. Nicholas Blomley (2004) has argued that, rather than being a natural occurrence, private property must be constantly policed and 'settled' by owners and courts in order to exist as such. Yet, the Horsh is entirely and firmly public property in the hands of the municipality of Beirut (lot 1925). In his reconstruction of the legal framework that regulates the Horsh, Bassam Chaya (2006) indicates that the Pine Forest was designated as public property by the Law of Real Estate Ownership issued by Resolution 3339 of 1930. Here, the parameters of the category of public property are those specified by resolution (*arrêté*) 144/1925 by the French High Commissioner, which terms public property as 'public domain' (*domaine public* in French and *al āmlāk al 'ama* in Arabic), intended to include 'everything that has been originally set up for everybody's use or public good. It is non-transferable over time' (Chaya 2006: 134). In addition to being part of the public domain, the Horsh was designated as Zone 9 in the 1954 Beirut Masterplan, making it completely *non aedificandi*,

meaning non-constructible. In this framework, authorities hold and manage the Horsh on behalf and for the benefit of inhabitants. Campaigners' understanding of the Horsh as a public park fitted well with the spirit of these regulations. Drawing both from narratives about the Horsh of the past and their experience of parks elsewhere, campaigners largely envisaged the Horsh as a loose space (Franck and Stevens 2007): a space of leisure at the service of residents, only loosely regulated and where Beirutis could meet, relax and act spontaneously, without having to spend money and hence regardless of their socio-economic background. Above all, this perspective implied that it was inhabitants' interests that reigned sovereign in this space. In Dalieh, issues of legal ownership meant that campaigners had to fight the weight of the liberal property regime with its 'obsessive individualism' (Hann 1998): owners clung to their legal rights in an attempt to legitimise the fencing of the area. Though the land on which the Horsh stands is incontrovertibly public, even this site was de facto privatised; the irony of the Horsh's predicament was not lost on my interlocutors. Worse of all was that the municipality, a public institution, was responsible for turning Beirut's largest park into an inaccessible 'pseudo public space' (Shayya 2010). My participants' dismay arose from the fact that the Horsh was appropriated *despite* its formal status as public land: in the absence of contestation over legal categories, what legitimate reasons could authorities possibly have to close the Horsh?

The Commons

When the right to urban space for all inhabitants is invoked, it is often analysed through the lens of the commons. The notion of the commons has gained traction amongst academics in recent years, engendering an extensive debate and new formulations of the concept. Often, these reflections are part and parcel of a political and ideological project in search of new forms of social, economic and political organisation that may represent an alternative to capitalism. For instance, Silvia Federici (2018: 93, see also Stavrides 2016 and Kalb and Mollona 2018) argues that commons are defined

> by the existence of a shared property, in the form of a shared natural or social wealth – lands, waters, forests, systems of knowledge, capacities for care – to be used by all commoners, without any distinction, but which are not for sale. Equal access to the necessary means of (re)production must be the foundation of life in the commons.

These commons do not already exist but rather need to be created by willing and active participants. The utopian ideals that underpin these new commons contrast with the reality of actually existing communal properties, as the latter

frequently function in ways that significantly depart from the horizontal and consensual model envisaged by radical intellectuals. Susana Narotzky (2013), for instance, has argued that communal properties are often neither open-access nor inclusive, as their enjoyment can be strictly regulated by social norms reflective of existing power structures and hierarchies (see also Kalb 2017). At the same time, spontaneous and unofficial urban commons that emerge not by design but by (force of) circumstance tend to be more unregulated and hence more freely accessible (Mady 2012; Mazraani 2020; Mitchell 1995; Saksouk-Sasso 2015). These spaces often thrive precisely because they escape authorities' gaze, and when privately owned they do not constitute an obvious opportunity for profit. Commoning, then, is incompatible with state authority and is essentially an anti-statist project (Trémon 2022). Publicly owned parks, however, are firmly under the authority and management of public institutions, as they are public rather than collective property. As such, they are public goods that exist explicitly to serve the general interest, although inhabitants only have indirect sovereignty and control over access and use of these spaces. Parks, especially larger ones, are typically fenced and often patrolled, and specific rules apply and are enforced within their boundaries. The Horsh was no exception: an old painted sign on the gate reminded visitors of a whole list of rules, including a ban on ball games. As much as the restored Horsh would serve the interests of Beirut's residents at large, it remained a public property, not a common, and its closure, as well as the campaign for its reopening, can only be understood in these terms.

Public Property

Overshadowed by analyses aimed at naturalising the notion of private property, public property is rarely investigated as a category of its own in critical social theory, especially anthropology, as it is typically included in other more prominent categories such as 'public space' or 'the commons'. The power dimensions of public law ownership rights are likewise easily overlooked. As Von Benda-Beckmann (1995: 319) has argued, 'property is an important means through which positions of sociopolitical authority are acquired. The legitimate authority to control, allocate, and exploit property is one of the most salient elements of power through which people can be subordinated at all levels of sociopolitical organization'. Attending to legal arrangements is thus essential to understand the social and political life of public parks, which are managed and policed by authorities. My interest in the law, however, does not lie in examining the formal provisions that govern – at least in theory – the production and governance of urban space in Beirut, itself a rich and growing domain of enquiry (amongst recent interventions, see Fawaz and Moumtaz 2017; Harb 2016; Lamy and Bou Aoun 2017; Verdeil 2010).

Rather, I am interested in examining the informal practices of governance enacted by authorities around the Horsh as public property. I specifically follow my interlocutors' concern for the formally public status of Horsh Beirut in unpicking its de facto privatisation. I thus concentrate on examining how the park's closure and other forms of appropriation specifically relate to the fact that the Horsh is publicly owned and is therefore directly managed by authorities on behalf of the collective.

Approached from this perspective, the Horsh's closure can be read as a form of elite appropriation of space that led to the park's de facto privatisation along lines of social, political and economic privilege (Chapter 2). Examining the Horsh through the lens of public property shows that appropriation took place not despite but crucially *because* of its formal public ownership. In my analysis, I thus consider the mechanisms through which public land can be easily appropriated by elites and, most importantly, what it takes to 'settle' it as public, to adapt Blomley's term. In doing so, I aim to bring together and expose the synergies that exist between perspectives on property and the appropriation of urban space in different strands of urban theory, critical planning and social anthropology, with the aim of building on and contributing to the growing, interdisciplinary literature that examines the contestation of urban management and shared spaces worldwide.

Figure 0.1. Horsh Beirut in 2014. © Alice Stefanelli

Figure 0.2. Horsh Beirut in 2014. © Alice Stefanelli

Civil Society, Politics, Participation

The material that forms the backbone of this book is drawn from fifteen months of ethnographic research conducted alongside civic campaigners at Together, the nongovernmental organisation that lobbied for the Horsh's reopening.[4] The association was first established by a group of friends as a student club at Lebanese University in the early 2000s, at a time of brewing sectarian tensions. For the first few years of its existence, Together's mission was that of bringing together youths from different sectarian backgrounds with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and strengthening social cohesion. Around 2010, the association began focusing on public space as a platform to bring together Lebanon's different communities and thereafter their campaign to reopen the Horsh was launched. While the association remained youth-led and youth-focused, Together[5] progressively went from an informal club to a formally constituted nongovernmental association (NGO) supported by a range of international donors from countries in the Global North. One of the original co-founders – Akram – remained directly involved, becoming Together's director, and by the mid-2010s he was joined by two full-time project managers – first Julia and then Leila, the latter after a

period of involvement as a volunteer. Besides these three fully employed staff members, Together was supported by a few dozen volunteers as well as many supporters and sympathisers, who offered ad hoc help. In the initial absence of media coverage, and in step with the times, Together made extensive use of social media, particularly Facebook, and kept a YouTube channel, where campaign videos were regularly shared with the wider public. However, the NGO also worked in more conventional ways, leafleting regularly, attending NGO fairs and spreading news of their work by word of mouth. Thanks to all their efforts, in time Together became well known advocates for the safeguard of public spaces in Beirut, although they also organised similar campaigns in other Lebanese cities. By the time I arrived in Lebanon in 2014, Together was part of a lively microcosm of activists, residents and professionals advocating for the right of all inhabitants to access the urban green spaces of the capital city, from the seafront to neighbourhood parks. Any analysis of the 'settling' of Horsh Beirut as public park is thus necessarily also an analysis of contemporary forms of civic advocacy and Beirutis' efforts to have a say in their city's governance.

Participation effected through nongovernmental organisations, or 'civil society', lies at the heart of multiple industries and practices, as well as fraught political and scholarly debates. Participation has long been defined as a language of development, particularly in the Global South, where actively engaging beneficiaries of development in decision-making has become synonymous with good practice (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Mohan 2007). However, participation has also become an important political idiom in the study of neoliberalism, where it has been judged less favourably. As governments promote neoliberal policies that 'roll-back' the state, scholars have noted that new moralised discourses about citizens' participation are encouraging people to organise and provide services no longer offered by the state, thus promoting a new kind of 'active citizenship' that replaces the defunct welfare state. Associations across continents are thus charged with creating and promoting new subjectivities that shift responsibility from authorities to individual 'responsible citizens', often marginalised ones (Fisher 1997; Muehlebach 2012b; Schuller 2009). In the Global South, this new type of governmentality and subjectivities are disseminated through the humanitarian, development and democratisation industries, famously structured around nongovernmental organisations (NGOs).

Participation effected through NGOs has also been thoroughly critiqued for reasons that go beyond the matter of the neoliberalisation of society. After an initial over-optimistic time in the 1990s, when rights NGOs were hailed as the obvious answer to all sorts of societal ills, from religious fundamentalism to women's subordination, scholars and activists alike began to question NGOs' ability to produce deep and lasting societal change. Issues

with NGO-style interventions – or 'civil society', as this field came to be known – range from dependence on the agendas of foreign donors to the inability to engage local constituencies meaningfully. NGO work is accused of depoliticising what would otherwise be political revendications by reducing them to technical issues to be pragmatically fixed (Li 2007; Ferguson 1990). In her seminal article on the NGOisation of women's movements in the Arab world, Islah Jad (2007: 627–28) notes that NGOs' 'project-logic' 'leads to the transformation of a cause for social change into a project with a plan, a timetable, and a limited budget, which is "owned" for reporting and used for the purposes of accountability vis-à-vis the funders'. Ultimately, the charge brought against NGOs is that they are ineffective, as their work is not sufficiently confrontational and does not bring about structural change, while also overshadowing, replacing or hindering the growth of grassroots mass mobilisation (Allen 2013; Hammami 1995).

These debates are important not only because they provide critical analytical perspectives but because they concern scholars *as well as* actors on the ground. Similar concerns in fact animate discussions about the articulations and disarticulations of civil society and political activism in Lebanon, particularly in anti-sectarian and leftist milieus. Activists worry that NGOs' accountability vis-à-vis their funders might constrain and unduly shape their strategies (AbiYaghi 2016; Kaoues 2012) and that the professionalisation of activism depoliticises campaigning and renders it ineffective (Hermez 2011b; Kiwan 2017; Musallam 2020b). An added concern in Lebanon is that NGOs might be imbricated in the country's sectarian system, putting up a non-sectarian front while being secretly funded by a particular sectarian faction. According to Karam Karam (2006), the creation of politically affiliated associations was part of the process of adaptation undergone by wartime militias in the 1990s, where associations came to replace the now-banned militia structures on the ground. These NGOs are thus part of an extensive network of political sectarianism that extends through the social fabric and are complicit in its reproduction (Beyond – Reform & Development 2015; Clark and Salloukh 2013; Kingston 2013). Regardless of the provenance of their funding, civil society organisations are implicated in networks of power and politics that made them suspicious to other activists as well as ordinary inhabitants.

While critiques of participation have been essential to show the limits and shortcomings of development practice, democratisation theory and the power of civic associations to single-handedly resolve all societal ills, scholars have also identified limits to this approach. Yarrow and Venkatesan (2012: 9) argue that critiques of development tend to treat this field as a monolithic set of Western ideas and practices, while in reality these ideas 'are imbricated in the practices and relationships of otherwise socially, culturally

and geographically distinct people' (see also Ollivon and Siméant 2015). Discussing rural development in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, Michelle Obeid (2012) similarly argues that global concepts of social change and participation must be contextualised in local social and political histories, as well as actors' present projects and their significance. It is only by attending to this 'constellation' of 'motivations, intentions and agencies that are behind people's involvement in development' (ibid.: 152) that commitment to effecting change through NGOs, rather than traditional politics, becomes meaningful. If Western-style NGOs are a product of the expansion of the development and democratisation industry, associations per se are not a completely novel social form, in Lebanon as in other parts of the Arab world (Ben Nefissa 2002; Karam 2002). Rather, Karam (2006) shows that associations have a local history that can be traced back to the late Ottoman period, covering both communal or charitable associations and political organisations. Even with the influx of funds tied to the democratisation industry, the period immediately following the official end of the civil war in 1990 was particularly fruitful for activists, who looked for 'civil' ways to debate the future of the country that did not entail violence. The manner in which global discourses graft onto local contexts and make sense to actors should not be assumed, but rather determined empirically on a case-by-case basis. Making sense of the heterogeneous organisations that make up 'civil society' is thus a complex task that requires a certain degree of attention to nuance.

Importantly for this book, the notion that *a priori* engagement in civil society-as-NGOs cannot be politicised, and that it is disconnected from collective mobilisation, should also be carefully reconsidered. While my interlocutors were not interested in politics with a capital 'P', as this largely identified sectarian politics, they understood their work to be inherently political, inasmuch as they aimed at shaping institutional practices and social attitudes surrounding the idea of the public as a physical space as well as a discursive domain. Taking the cue from my interlocutors, in this book I argue that civil society might indeed constitute a platform to do work that is political and politicising, and that ruling out in principle this possibility fails to recognise the versatility of associations and the profound ways in which they are embedded in broader landscapes of social and political activism (Chapter 3).

This argument will depend at least in part on a specific characterisation of the 'political'. Timothy Mitchell (1999) has pointed out that much political and social theory relies on a fictitious spatial model that segments the social world in a set of autonomous, mutually independent spheres – the state, civil society, the economy – each characterised by a specific type of phenomena and actors. For instance, party politics pertains strictly to the political, while associations belong solely to the civil. The fictional nature of these spheres

became apparent in early literature on civil society. Works such as Cohen and Arato (1994), Norton (1993) or Putnam (1993) implicitly or explicitly adopted this model and attempted to categorise associations accordingly. These endeavours, however, unavoidably ran into difficulties, as the civil or political character of many associations was unclear. Trade unions, for instance, were too ambiguous to be categorised neatly: were they a part of civil society, as associations based on mutual agreement amongst members, or were they rather political, in virtue of their association to political parties and, by extension, government? This impasse can be overcome by shifting away from an analysis of social formations that is tied to the partition of social reality into spheres. Marxist scholar Georges Balandier (1967) argues in fact that politics is not a space but rather a quality of acts, statements and phenomena that is aimed at affecting decision making, pursuing collective goals and generally influencing the collective life of a polity, at different scales. Crucially, political acts may be devoted to maintaining the status quo as much as to upsetting it. This book thus adopts a 'broad conception of the political, as relations and interventions, often agonistic, that are enacted with a "public" dimension' and seeks to explore 'how the political comes to be constituted, and the categories themselves, like "the state" and "the people", come to be imagined, experienced, invoked, and performed' by actors on the ground (Rasanayagam, Beyer and Reeves 2014: 5). Politics, in this perspective, may be more aptly described as a 'practice of world-making that proceeds through the formulation of constellations of critique, disagreement, difference and conflict' and that are ultimately 'struggles to live otherwise' (Postero and Elinoff 2019: 6).

Such an approach is important because it allows us to investigate the possibility of performing politics and conducting political action outside the traditional realm of government, electoral politics and political activism *sensu stricto*, while also looking out for different projects that may be articulated by these non-traditional engagements with collective dissent and critique. Taking a looser approach to politics also enables us to look beyond the specific issue of whether mobilisations are successful in creating significant and structural change. Firstly, many radical political initiatives do not achieve their goals or significant structural change, including when they are fuelled by mass popular participation (Bayat 2021; Musallam 2020b). Secondly, approaches that exclude NGOs from the realm of the political tend to equate politics with mass movements *tout court*, while in fact politics, including political action that affects the sociopolitical status quo, exists in multiple shapes and forms: lobbies, trading cartels, revolutions, armed insurgency, diplomacy, 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1985; Abu Lughod 1986) and non-movements (Bayat 2010), amongst others. Lastly, failure also produces effects, even when these effects are not the ones that were initially planned

and desired (Ferguson 1990). A move away from narrow definitions of politics instead opens the possibility to concentrate on motivations, rationales, the workings of these projects and their unintended outcomes, as well as their multiple entanglements with the sociopolitical world. Obeid's (2012: 158) ethnography of developmental work in the Bekaa Valley itself chronicles the initiatives of former activists who, in the post-civil war period, were transferring their political commitment from 'failing medium, political parties, to a promising unexplored one, NGOs' (see also Mathur 2012; Prince and Brown 2016).

My interlocutors at Together reasoned in similar terms. On the one hand, campaigners were aware of the limits of NGOs and conscious of their pitfalls. On the other, they had concluded that civic advocacy was the most useful tool available to them to express their dissent vis-à-vis urban governance and contest the latter openly and, importantly, protractedly. By not discarding *a priori* the possibility that campaigners' actions may be political in nature or motivation, we are encouraged to examine the reasons that led campaigners to act from outside more traditional realms of political action, choosing civil society rather than either parties or independent political movements, which were also present in Beirut at the time. The argument that I put forth in this respect is that civic advocacy was for my interlocutors an expression of political participation *and* an expression of citizenship (Chapter 4).[6] Firstly, advocacy incarnated the desire to have a voice in public debate with the aim of taking part in and affecting the city and country's decision-making, expressing one's needs and reclaiming their rights to be heard. Secondly, advocacy was an opportunity to enact a form of non-sectarian citizenship that the Lebanese were rarely afforded by the sociopolitical system and be *muwaṭanīn* (citizens) rather than an *āhlīn* (sectarian subjects) in the space of their campaigning (see Traboulsi 2012 [2009]: 110). Importantly, this understanding of citizenship pivoted on attempting to force authorities to alter public action – a rather dissensual type of citizenship at its roots, even when it was enacted through townhalls and public picnics rather than radical direct action.

Interrogating the rationale that informed the choice of acting from civil society also affords us the opportunity to appreciate the existence of alternative, less linear and less traditional processes of politicisation that may eschew existing political formations while retaining their potential to engage and mobilise individuals. Seen in this light, civil society emerges as a domain that can equally produce professionalised, depoliticised and ultimately consensual types of action as much as politicised actors whose advocacy aims at contesting authorities and, in Mona Harb's (2018) terms, disrupting governance. I thus argue that, by disrupting governance-as-usual, this kind of civic advocacy may open up windows of possibility for both the disruption of neoliberal

decision making and, crucially, for campaigners' politicisation. Approached ethnographically, civil society thus constitutes an *ambivalent space* inhabited by actors that may contradict normative expectations about nongovernmental organisations, cautioning against predictive analyses of 'civil society' that might unduly homogenise projects, strategies and rationales put forth by diverse actors on the ground.

Statecraft

Many stories could be told about the closure of Horsh Beirut and Together's fight to reopen it. Some of them would undoubtably closely examine the relationship between campaigners and the public, in a bid to understand how a seemingly non-urgent cause like green space might be promoted to an audience primarily concerned with the failings of public infrastructure and basic service provision. Other stories might focus instead on hope for the future, which is an orientation widely shared by social movements, particularly those where the youth play a substantial role. Reflecting on youth involvement in the Arab Uprisings, Suad Joseph (2013), for instance, has pointed out the inability of many Arab states to provide the younger generations with viable futures. However, centred on the tension between the public and the private, the story that is told by this book is one rather focused on the prolonged efforts made by campaigners to cause change now, in the present, and particularly within public action. As the source of public policy but also an important node in the country's political economy, the state, *al dawla*, was central to my interlocutors' preoccupations. My interlocutors, however, shared this concern with scholars, as large swathes of political theory on Lebanon revolves around analyses of the state, including but not limited to studies of its alleged weakness (Atzili 2010; Fregonese 2012; Rotberg 2002), its consociational and sectarian set up (Haugbolle 2010; Salibi 1988; Salloukh et al. 2015), including its intersections with gender and sexuality (Mikdashi 2022), and its (neo)liberal character (Baumann 2016; see also Baumann and Moawad 2017). Whilst, following my interlocutors, a focus on the state is an essential dimension of this book, I will approach the subject from a distinctly anthropological perspective that aims not to elaborate a theory of the Lebanese state per se, but rather to understand what is at stake when campaigners call for a different type of state to manifest and act in their lives. For while the state is clearly an important ethnographic presence, anthropological theory has questioned whether we can speak of a coherent and monolithic entity called 'the state' at all. Timothy Mitchell (1999), for instance, has rejected received wisdom popular in Western political theory that presents the state as an integrated set of administrative structures and

functions that fit together harmoniously and stand apart from society, ruling over it. Rather, adopting a Foucauldian perspective, Mitchell argues that the state is not a coherent entity and that its functions, structures and aims diverge, overlap and clash with one another (see also Nugent 2004). In a similar vein, drawing from Poulantzas, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001: 136) notes that 'the state never was an object of observation. It was always a construction'. What do exist, however, are 'state effects', which provide the state with a semblance of concreteness. In ethnographic terms, the state is reified in people's minds through public discourses and images about the state as well as individuals' everyday encounters with state structures, regulations and representatives, such as bureaucracies, borders, police officers, prisons, hospitals, nurses and teachers (Aretxaga 2003; Das and Poole 2004; Gupta 1995; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005; Sharma and Gupta 2006). Yet, as Trouillot (2001) has emphasised, state effects *are* real and so is state power, whose weight is unevenly distributed across social groups. Rather than a monolithic and all-powerful entity, then, we might rather regard the state as a

> relational setting that cannot be categorized according to simple hierarchies or a governing center, but that exists within the relations between actors who have unequal access to material, social, regulatory, and symbolic resources and who negotiate over ideas of legitimate power by drawing on existing state images – at once reaffirming and transforming these representations within concrete practices. (Thelen, Vetters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2014: 7)

A well-established anthropological tradition has examined the ways in which the power of the state, frequently entwined with that of colonialism and capitalist penetration, bears on people, particularly disadvantaged and marginalised populations (Aretxaga 2003; Das and Poole 2004; Ortner 2016; Taussig 1980). Seminal studies such as Clastres' (1977) and Scott's (1985) particularly focused on the notion of resistance, thus setting people against the state. Stemming from a similar tradition, anti-capitalist literature also posits the state as fundamentally incompatible with the commons, discarding any potential role of public institutions in providing public goods (Dardot and Laval 2019; Hardt and Negri 2009; Trémon 2022). Yet, more recent anthropological scholarship has also remarked that the relationship between people and the state is deeply affective and may be more complex than analyses focused on resistance alone may recognise. Distrust and rejection may in fact coexist with hope and desire for the state (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Spencer 2007), particularly when one specific, ideal version or 'face' of the state might promise a more prosperous future and a 'normal' life (Harvey and Knox 2015; Jansen 2015; Obeid

2010). The state, Obeid suggests, is good 'for dreaming'. In a piece titled 'States of Aspiration', the author argues:

> If we recognize that statism permeates the political imaginary, one central question that emerges from this is: what kind of spaces exist or are created for exercising agency in participating in statecraft, rather than evading, resisting, and working outside of it? And what are the possible trajectories that we could tap through our ethnographic approaches? (2015: 25–26)

This book answers this call, not only as a theoretical intervention but also as an ethnographic necessity. My interlocutors vehemently opposed authorities' style of governance and political rhetoric but also imagined, desired and invoked a different kind of state that might enable substantial, positive change in Beirut and in Lebanon at large. However, they did more than simply wish for a different state and attempted to bring it into existence daily through their advocacy. The state, *al dawla*, was far from being an abstract and distant entity for my interlocutors. Instead, it was incarnated by the people who shaped decision-making and whom campaigners encountered repeatedly in their advocacy: local MPs (*al nūāb*), the mayor (*ra'is al baladiya*), the governor (*al muḥāfiẓ*, commonly spelt *mohafez*), ministers (*al wizarā'*), the government (*al ḥukūma*) and more generally public authorities (*al sulṭāt al 'ama*), public institutions (*mu'sasalāt 'ama*) and those in a position of power and responsibility (*al musū'ulin*). Terms indicating the state (*al dawla*) and the municipality (*al baladiyya*, or *baladia*) were also often used interchangeably, the latter taken as a metonymy for the former, both equally implicated in public governance. It was the state in these flesh-and-bone manifestations that became the focal point of Together's campaigning, as members hoped that putting pressure on authorities might reorient the institutions they headed.

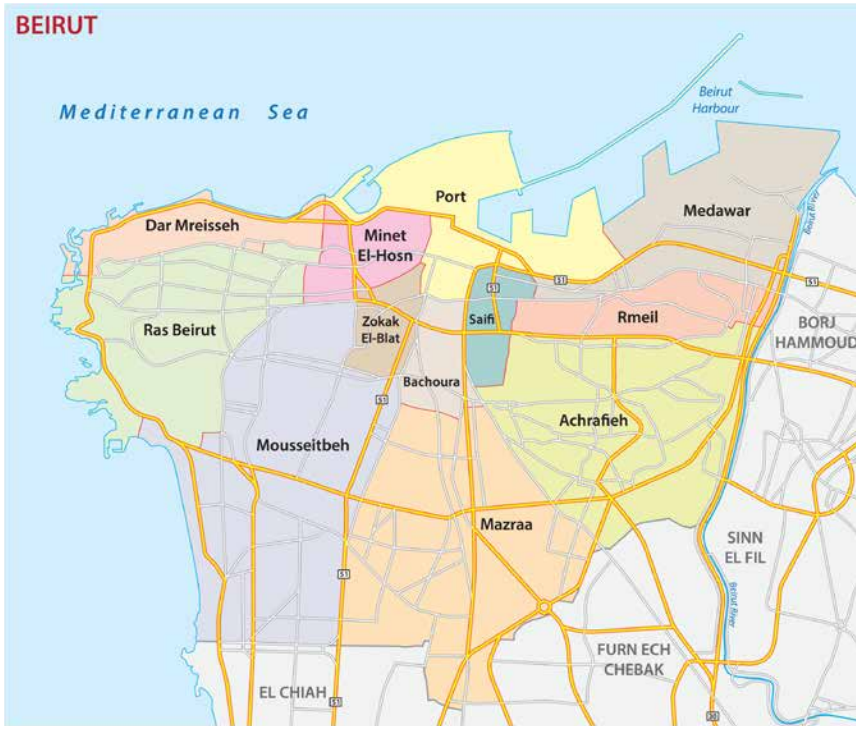
The concrete, programmatic advocacy work that engaged campaigners' time and efforts thus emerged as a project of statecraft that might shape 'what the state does, claims to do, and should do' (Jansen 2015: 12) in urban governance, particularly but not limited to the provision and upkeep of green open spaces (Chapter 5). As the book will show, campaigners' statecraft is also aimed at affecting the country's statehood – 'what the state is and should be' (ibid.) – away from the elitist and sectarian system that characterises it. Importantly, a project of statecraft, as an analytical lens, is not prescriptive. A project of statecraft does not answer to any specific parameters: it can be radical as much as reformist, state-centred or anti-system, liberal or anti-capitalist, and it may or may not aim to produce structural change. Rather, such a notion denotes any effort devoted to changing state action, particularly but not exclusively public action. The benefit of this approach

lies in its ability to capture a wide variety of political projects and take them seriously regardless of their origin and orientation. By casting a wide net, we can account for multiple commitments, strategies, constraints and possibilities for political action while also appreciating how campaigners diagnose the state's shortcomings and what vision they themselves might harbour for a state – and, essentially, country – otherwise. Reversing Michel Foucault's well-known statement, Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) famously argued that since where there is resistance there is power we can use resistance to diagnose power. Applying this fruitful approach to the subject at hand, I then propose to interrogate civil society not only to map the state and its power but also to examine what people themselves recognise as being the state's failures and what alternative options they imagine and try to materialise through different types of interventions. This is particularly important in the case of groups lacking a strong political affiliation or ideological allegiance, whose perspectives might not readily align with commonly accepted perspectives, be they scholarly or activist ones.

(Im)Mobile Approaches

Ethnography conducted in an urban setting, such as that presented in this book, is forcibly ethnography *in* the city. Frequently, urban ethnographies are designed as studies of specific neighbourhoods, more or less spatially and often socially bounded entities that somewhat mirror the conditions of traditional village ethnographies (Abu-Lughod 1989; Deeb and Winegar 2012). A number of ethnographic studies have been conducted in Beirut, in neighbourhoods as disparate as Bourj Hammoud (Joseph 1978;[7] Nucho 2016), Dahiyeh and the southern suburbs (Deeb 2006; Harb and Deeb 2013) and Ain Mreisse (Sawalha 2010), which are architecturally and geographically different from each other but also have different socio-economic and sectarian compositions.[8] My ethnography, however, did not take place in any one single area or neighbourhood. Campaigners' meetings often took place at the NGO's offices, located in a traditional Lebanese home in an otherwise residential area. It was here that I conducted participant observation, attending briefings, meetings and social get-togethers; Together were in fact a very sociable group of people who enjoyed each other's company and frequently organised film nights and communal dinners in the office. They also enjoyed welcoming newcomers to the cause and were quick to invite them to such events. However, protests and instances of direct action often took place elsewhere, in central neighbourhoods such as Downtown, and less central ones such as Tariq el Jdideh, bordering the Horsh. In addition, I myself lived and spent considerable amounts of time socialising in

Hamra, another central area of the city. As the neighbourhood was also the home of a number of public institutions and two eminent English-language universities – the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese American University (LAU) – campaigners often attended or even organised activities there.[9] Not much time was spent in or around the Horsh itself. While the park was the focal point of Together's work, besides exceptional open days it was closed to the public until the very last weekend of my stay in Beirut. Even when Together organised events near the Horsh, planning and preparation took place in their headquarters, so that little of my actual ethnography unfolded there. The fieldsite of my research, then, cannot be easily defined or pinpointed spatially; it was not delimited by precise boundaries but rather seemed multiple and rarefied, composed of many non-contiguous sites peppered around Beirut and across which my interlocutors and I moved. Rather than being merely an ethnography *in* the city, I thus understand this book as contributing explicitly to an anthropology *of* the city (Gulick 1989; Low 1996), following Fox's (1972) proposition that anthropologists account for the city as a social institution in itself, rather than regarding it merely



Map 0.1. Map of central Beirut. © Shutterstock

as the physical location where research unfolds. Ethnography *in* Beirut is also an ethnography *of* Beirut itself, in this perspective. An ethnography of pro-public space campaigning is also forcibly an investigation of how the multiple local and translocal forces and political-economic circumstances that are shaping the urban environment are affecting the possibilities of life in the city.

Any ethnography is, of course, conducted from a specific perspective, based on the ethnographer's own positionality but also on the positionality of the group of interlocutors in which the researcher is embedded. The desire for a holistic account of the city – or, in fact, of any fieldsite – and the lived experience of all its inhabitants is a mere chimera (Candea 2007), and the boundaries of 'the field' were for me contingent and arbitrary, shaped by my interlocutors' movements across Beirut as well as my own (Amit 2003). From this point of view, my ethnography is rooted in the physical as well as the immaterial public and private spaces inhabited by myself and by my mostly – but not exclusively – young, educated Beiruti interlocutors, where they socialised and carried out their advocacy work. Locating Beirut – determining where the city begins and ends – is itself a complex task. Cities in general are not bounded and self-contained monoliths but rather, their materiality notwithstanding, they are reified entities whose boundaries are socially and politically constructed, contested and negotiated (Çinar and Bender 2007; King 2007). While Beirut as an administrative area is clearly defined by official boundaries, what neighbourhoods – and what communities of inhabitants – constitute the city is not self-evident. It is, for instance, widely accepted that some consider the 'real' Beirut to be circumscribed to the central areas of the city that have historically been the cultural, political and intellectual hub of the city. Beirut in fact has historically enjoyed the fame of being a 'Paris of the East', a modern, liberal and cosmopolitan environment that attracted not only Arab artists and intellectuals but also their international counterparts (Kassir 2010; Rogers 2007). Narratives and images of a cosmopolitan, middle-upper class Beirut embodied by its central neighbourhoods endure today (Moussawi 2018) and are juxtaposed to geographically and, crucially, socially peripheral areas shaped by a history of rural-urban migration and refugeehood (Allan 2014; Fawaz 1983; Saleh 2016). Such neighbourhoods, often inhabited by less well-off residents, are thus by definition excluded from this restrictive definition of the city: discourses on the city do not only attribute characters to places (Massey 1995) but also contribute to defining their very location within the sociopolitical urban landscape.

To what words such as 'Beirut' or 'the city' refer, in my text, is thus deeply contextual. In spatial terms, my fieldwork was mostly located within the boundaries of municipal Beirut, which stretches between the Mediterranean

Sea, the River Kelb and the southern tip of the Horsh. However, my activities were largely focused on a handful of the many neighbourhoods comprised within those borders. Some of these areas were very central such as Hamra, where I lived and often attended events, while others lay around the Horsh and thus stood along the official municipal boundary. While my own fieldwork took place within these neighbourhoods, many of my interlocutors lived outside municipal Beirut, some close by, in the suburbs, and others further afield, in different towns and villages.[10] Their Beirut was possibly more expansive and their perspectives on the city coloured by the specificities of living outside its central areas while commuting daily to work, socialise and study there. The city today, in many respects, exceeds its official boundaries, as the progressive melding of the urban fabric between Beirut and the towns in its hinterland has created a large urban conglomerate that houses well over one and a half million people. Beirut, as a space and a fieldsite, is thus a shifting notion rather than a fixed, objective fact. In this book, I sought to account for these different changes in register – from more 'restrictive' or specific notions of Beirut to more 'expansive' ones – by contextualising my use and my interlocutors' uses of the different terms when necessary.

While my research did not constitute multisited ethnography, it entailed movement and mobility in a number of ways. 'Following' (Marcus 1995) is thus still an accurate term to characterise the bulk of my ethnography, as campaigners were constantly on the move between their workplaces, meetings and advocacy events. I therefore myself spent a considerable amount of time travelling to meet campaigners in different locations, sharing cabs with them and walking together around neighbourhoods where they conducted their activities. Moving in space, but especially moving together, became an important dimension of my research, as in doing so I was provided with the opportunity to discuss the city with my interlocutors in a casual and informal way, thus coming to know Beirut's past and present in ways that mattered to my participants and their everyday work (Ingold and Vergunst 2016; Lee and Ingold 2006; Porter et al. 2010). In addition, these practices forced me to acquaint myself with the city's present and past in ways that accounted for its materiality and the deeply affective nature of inhabitants' encounters with their city and, by extension, country system. Such a mobile approach also offered unexpected insights into my interlocutors' quotidian experience of the city as a congested, expensive and ultimately increasingly unliveable place (Stefanelli 2021). These insights complemented and enriched the focus on urban policymaking and civic advocacy that constituted the thrust of my research.

At the same time, my ethnography was also intimately characterised by immobility. In fact, I spent extensive amounts of time sitting in the audiences of conferences, talks and town hall meetings, at which campaigners

participated either as speakers or attendees. Similarly, I stood in protests, holding banners and chanting slogans. In these situations, I always participated by distributing leaflets and joining actions – but often I otherwise had little to actively contribute. My limited linguistic abilities and, importantly, lack of technical skills (in graphic design, training in architecture or traffic management) prevented me from making a more significant contribution to the advancement of the cause. Many interactions with my interlocutors took place on the fringes of these events, in smaller groups or one-to-one conversations. It was in these marginal spaces that I first encountered some of the protagonists of this book; some of these conversations in fact progressively grew into more significant research relationships, and I came to spend more time with these campaigners: we had prolonged chats, met up after a day of work or went for coffee. This pattern of interaction will become evident in the narrative, as several conversations reported took place around a table, whether eating lunch at the local *furn* (bakery) or sipping a lemonade in one of Hamra's fashionable cafes. Much sitting was indeed done in cafés, restaurants and pubs during my fifteen months of fieldwork. These are popular meeting places in Beirut, where people congregate during the day for a catch up with friends, to have lunch but also to work. Together campaigners were not the only Beirutis I sat with, as often I did so with other acquaintances and friends who had different degrees of awareness of Together's campaigning. With these friends and acquaintances, I went to meetings or cultural events organised by the many activist groups in Beirut, drank *rakweh* (Arabic coffee), ate *kibbeh* (bulghur and meat balls) and discussed the news and the vicissitudes of common acquaintances. These friends welcomed me into their homes and drove me around Beirut and beyond, explaining to me Lebanon from their own point of view as they did so. These interactions were ultimately just as valuable for me to make sense of the social world that I inhabited. These exchanges in fact took place with Beirutis with similar social positions to campaigners, working in similar fields either as professionals or activists and having sometimes similar, but also different ideas, experiences and perspectives on Beirut, its governance and what change was needed. These relationships provided me with constant food for thought and a range of different perspectives to explore in my conversations and interviews with campaigners themselves, so that they ultimately were as constitutive of my research as campaigners' views and practices.

Stretching Intimacies

Committed to reaching as many people as possible with their message, Together volunteers were very open and welcomed anyone, from any

background and walk of life, interested in their work. This included researchers, with whom Together regularly collaborated as their work became more visible in and outside the country. The NGO was similarly well disposed towards my own research project because of the enthusiasm that I showed as a foreign researcher interested in learning more about the issue to which they dedicated a great amount of their time.[11] I first met Akram at a protest outside the Municipality of Beirut; I was introduced to him by a common acquaintance and was immediately encouraged to drop by the office the following week to talk about public space. Akram was in his early thirties at the time and was clearly very proud of how far Together had come from its humble beginnings as a student club. As the current director, he was proud of the hard work that everyone at the organisation put in day in and day out and relished the opportunity of sharing it with anyone who was interested and might join the cause. Our initial interview quickly gave way to an invitation to return a few days later to join an evening social get-together, which later became a more general invitation to come along to meetings and events, to help and to learn about the Horsh along the way. While most people at Together were extremely open to foreign researchers, not everyone in Beirut shared the same appreciation for foreign researchers – particularly those from the Global North – or at least not as a default position. A city with a long tradition as a regional cosmopolitan hub, Beirut is not unaccustomed to foreigners, especially those Westerners attracted over the decades by the exotic myth of the 'Switzerland of the East'. Beirut's large nongovernmental organisation industry also attracts scores of non-Lebanese aid professionals and volunteers, whose numbers typically increase after a period of humanitarian 'crisis' (Abi Yaghi and Troit 2020). At the time of my research, the most recent pull factor for humanitarian workers and researcher was the growing numbers of refugees caused by the ongoing civil war in neighbouring Syria.[12] The Arab Uprisings, in addition, impacted the movement of researchers and Arabic language students within the region: as several Arab countries were no longer accessible in the 2010s, many changed their destination to Lebanon. Foreign researchers, students and humanitarian workers alike are thus often – and rightly – accused of being unprepared, uninterested in learning Arabic and of producing stereotyped, superficial representations of Lebanese society that approximate traditional orientalist attitudes. During a brief catch-up visit in 2018, I expressed to some friends my wish to return to Beirut for a longer period. One of them promptly suggested that I apply for a consultancy job. He then recounted the recent case of an international NGO who had employed a North American researcher to conduct and analyse a series of focus groups on the rather delicate topic of refugee women's experiences of sexual harassment. The consultancy apparently cost tens of thousands of dollars, despite the researcher's complete ignorance of the Arabic language

and the local context. These glaring shortcomings had to be tempered by employing a local facilitator and interpreter, who presumably did not receive the same payment. Being a European researcher in Beirut though common was, understandably, not always viewed positively.[13] 'At least you speak [some] Arabic', my friend shrugged. I thus echo Kristin Monroe (2016) in saying that my legitimacy as a fieldworker in Beirut could not be built on my credentials as a researcher from a Western institution, in my case not least because Manchester, where I was studying for my Ph.D., was mostly known in Lebanon for its football teams. Instead, I benefitted from a succession of willing gatekeepers who introduced me to friends and friends of friends until eventually I was put in touch with Together's director.

Despite my problematic association with the West, my positionality during my time in Beirut was not set in stone and was rather negotiated and renegotiated according to circumstance. Various elements of my biography were in fact interpreted and received differently by different interlocutors. My Europeanness, for one, was nuanced by nationality. The fact that I am Italian actually helped me establish some common ground with interlocutors, including some who were initially more reluctant to talk to me. When I corrected the assumption that I was British, American or perhaps German, some of my interlocutors' diffidence vanished and jokes about me being a spy or a naive Westerner were replaced by greater friendliness and even a sense of comradery. One explanation lies in the way Italy is classified in Lebanon. While Italians are recognised as Europeans, and thus Westerners, they do not always count as the same type of Europeans as the Germans or the British. Instead, as Southern Europeans, Italians are frequently seen as more culturally akin to the Lebanese and part of an improvised category of 'Mediterraneans'. My interlocutors and I could bond over our passion for good food, hot weather and the relaxed lifestyle that was lacking in the northern countries in which many of us had lived. Italy and Lebanon also share altogether less positive traits, such as our embarrassing politics, conservative social attitudes and the pervasive presence of a mafia-like ethos and organisations. Here, my Europeanness became a footnote to my Italianity rather than the other way around. Michael Herzfeld describes cultural intimacy as 'the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (2005: 3). Local – and global – perceptions of Italy interplayed with the Lebanese self-image, creating the potential for my interlocutors and me to stretch certain cultural intimacies to encompass both our countries and create a new Mediterranean-ness that could accommodate us together. This shift in perception created a more relaxed and friendly relationship with many interlocutors. However, it also meant that many of them ceased to explain things explicitly to me, regularly commenting: 'But

you're Italian: you know what it's like.' While sometimes I did know, in other instances I did not or could not be sure that I did. However, caught in the flow of the conversation, I did not always ask for clarification, or realised too late that I might have misunderstood. In my analysis, I have remained mindful of these grey areas, as I remain conscious of the limits of 'common ground'. This 'third' Mediterranean identity that some of my interlocutors and I developed was not natural, nor did it objectively exist; rather, it was engendered by a mutual wish to create and inhabit this 'stretched' cultural intimacy together. Not all interlocutors were interested in finding this kind of commonality between us, and with them my research relationship often remained more professional and grounded in the shared interest for the topics of my fieldwork.[14] In addition, many Italians living and working in Lebanon very vocally refused to consider themselves similar to the Lebanese, which negatively coloured the perceptions of Italians amongst some Beirutis and further disqualified the possibility of building a shared identity beyond a common professional interest.

Roadmap

The book is comprised of five chapters, which approach the analysis of the politics of public interest in Beirut in two movements: the first two chapters present and unpack the issue of public property in Beirut at large and the Horsh in particular, while the remaining three explore its implications for the structuring of citizenship, political action and statecraft. This narrative structure means, perhaps unconventionally, that although we encounter campaigners and residents of Beirut from the beginning of the book, Together and their work only step into the ethnographic limelight in later chapters. Chapter 1 provides historical contextualisation for the ethnography presented in the rest of the book. The chapter draws on existing sources, particularly urban histories of Beirut but also maps and photographs, to piece together a provisional picture of the emergence and evolution of open and green spaces in the city, starting from the late Ottoman period and ending with the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990).[15] This endeavour will show that the emergence and disappearance of open spaces in the city depends on more than just the advance of urbanisation and rather reflects a more multidimensional and complex history of fragmented planning, projects of state-building and processes of (de)regulation, conflict and socio-economic change. Following, Chapter 2 unpacks the forced, long-term closure of Horsh Beirut as public property and argues that it was appropriated by sociopolitical elites not *despite* its official public ownership, but rather *because* of it. In this light, I adapt, combine and repurpose Nicholas Blomley's

(2004) notion of 'settling property', Maurice Godelier's (1986) notion of 'materialising property' and Franck and Stevens's (2007) idea of 'loose space' to highlight the fragile, contingent and ultimately unstable character of public property and, therefore, public interest in urban settings. I conclude that, faced with particularist interests, public property as a social domain requires constant and laborious settling as much as private property does, performed by inhabitants themselves. Chapter 3 and 4 interrogate two interrelated dimensions of Together's civic advocacy and its relationship to the realm of political action and participation and the disruption of governance-as-usual. As such, the two are designed to be read in conjunction with one another. Chapter 3 analyses the trajectory of Together's campaigning, from university club to fully-fledged nongovernmental organisation (*munaẓama* or *jamaʿiya ghaiyr hukūmiya* – or simply *jamaʿiya*, association). Rejecting the normative notion that engagement in advocacy is necessarily antithetical to political engagement, and particularly to mass-mobilisation, I argue that civil society is best understood as an *ambivalent space* where different actors, projects and relations to political work coexist. Chapter 4 develops this line of reasoning by focusing on campaigning as a process of engagement and thus explores the motivations that lead Together members towards civic advocacy. I argue that civic advocacy affords campaigners a rare space where they can enact a non-sectarian yet inherently dissensual type of citizenship that they desire but is otherwise largely precluded to them. As such, civil society emerges as a window of opportunity towards politicisation. Chapter 5, which concludes the book, does not only conclude the overarching narrative but is also complementary to Chapter 2, as in it I return to the issue of 'settling' the public. Instead of concentrating on property, however, the chapter is concerned with understanding how campaigners go about settling the state and, specifically, public authorities, which are the flesh-and-blood incarnation of *al dawla*. This approach prompts an investigation into the visions of the state to come that campaigners have developed and the projects of statecraft that they have designed and implemented to bring Lebanon closer to the state and country that it 'ought' to be.

Notes

1. The Horsh has many names. In the local Arabic dialect, it is known as *horsh* (or *horj*, forest), *Horsh Beirut* (Beirut's Forest) or *Horsh al Sanawbar* (Pine Forest). In French, the park is known by the latter name's literal translation, *Bois de Pins*, and usually spelt as '*Horch*'.
2. The Taif Agreement, so-called as it was signed in the town of Taif in Saudi Arabia, officially brought the long Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) to a close in November 1989. One of the clauses of the Agreement was that political sectarianism would be eventually

dismantled (see Traboulsi 2012 [2009]). It should be noted that the conflict itself was not a unitary event but rather developed in ebbs and flows, leading Sami Hermez (2016) to propose adopting the phrase 'Lebanon's wars' in the plural.

3. The deepening of the economic crisis in the early 2020s, known as 'the collapse' (*al īnihār*), has further deteriorated services and eroded inhabitants' ability to afford rents and utilities, including supplementary private provision of water and energy.
4. Over the course of my fieldwork, I followed a number of campaigns fighting the privatisation of publicly accessible spaces in Beirut. However, as the book focuses on public space as public property, I will concentrate on the reopening of Horsh Beirut, as a consequence of Together's campaigning.
5. The association, like participants, are pseudonymised to blur identities as much as the size of Beirut's activist milieu would allow, and biographic elements have been kept to a minimum.
6. Catherine Neveu (2005) points out that, for historical reasons, citizenship is frequently confused with nationality but argues that the two should be disentangled from one another. This approach resonates with my ethnography, as expressing one's citizenship here indicates both the aspiration to be a non-sectarian national of the Lebanese state and the determination to be an inhabitant of Beirut with a right to the city (Lefebvre 1967). Whilst for my interlocutors, who were mostly Lebanese nationals, the two were entwined, 'citizenship' may also be used in an expansive sense to indicate belonging to a place based on residence rather than nationality, as in some instances in Together's campaigning. See the discussion of the slogan '*Horsh la kel*' in Chapter 2.
7. Suad Joseph's research in Bourj Hammoud spans several decades, so this particular text is to be taken simply as signposting a vast bibliography.
8. Hamra often appears in ethnographies of Beirut, and notably in studies of politics and activism (Hermez 2011b; Musallam 2020a, 2020b).
9. Together organised talks at a host of universities around the country, and not only in central Beirut.
10. These individuals often studied in Beirut, even when they did not reside there, a choice sometimes dictated by the prohibitive costs that living in the city would entail.
11. Together were eager for their work to become well known within and outside Lebanon, as part of their advocacy strategy. When in 2023 I paid them a visit to discuss this book, one of my closest interlocutors kindly argued that, despite any mistakes that I might make in it, the very fact that their work would be discussed in a book was a success for them.
12. A new wave of humanitarian assistance followed the Beirut port explosion of 4 August 2020, when the detonation of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate killed 218 people, injured 7,000 more and displaced around 300,000 residents.
13. The neocolonial and exploitative nature of research arrangements existing between academic institutions in the Global North and in Lebanon has been the subject of a damning article penned by Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock (2019).
14. On more than one occasion, I was told stories of Italians hailing from the north of the country who had explicitly, and vehemently, refused any association between themselves and Lebanon, mostly on account of Italy belonging to Europe and Lebanon the Arab world. See also Chamas (2016).
15. Maps used for this study are available at https://diverselevant.org/, a platform that presents maps and other visuals charting the urban development of Beirut throughout history. The platform is sponsored by the New Levant Initiative, Rice University's Humanities Research Centre, Axismap, and Beirut Urban Lab.