Beirut: The City as a Body Politic

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Israeli bombs completely destroyed Beirut's neighbourhood Haret Hreik in the summer of 2006. Because Hizbullah's headquarters is located in the neighbourhood, Israeli war planners considered its destruction of particular symbolic and strategic relevance. For the same reasons, authority of reconstruction carried heightened symbolism and led to contestation between the central government and Hizbullah. In the intersection of these two powerful actors there remains little room for local residents to have a voice in the re-organization of their living spaces.

During its blitz of Lebanon in the summer of 2006, the Israeli military ravaged the neighbourhood of Haret Hreik in the southern suburbs of Beirut, razing to the ground or severely damaging 265 residential, commercial, and office buildings, and displacing thousands of households in what Human Rights Watch described as Israeli "war crimes."[1] But beyond the sheer tonnage of ordinance targeting Haret Hreik was the symbolic violence attempting to erase the body politic which had produced this space. Paralleling the September 11 attack on New York's World Trade Center, the city was invoked by Israeli war planners as a party to the conflict; erasing a neighbourhood or a number of buildings amounted to undermining the life-support of an enemy, in this case Hizbullah, which had established its national headquarters in the neighbourhood.

Reflecting on the September 11 attacks and the events that ensued, David Harvey proposed to conceptualize the city as a body politic which can be attacked, wounded, remoulded, or rebuilt.[2] This metaphor, Harvey argued, provides an interesting entry point to examine the relation between processes of urban production and the (necessarily contested) governance of the city. It directs analysis towards the political choices taken as this body politic was historically created and how, once formed, such a body politic confronts various challenges. A year after the "July War," as it is commonly called in Lebanon, this essay offers reflections on the current post-war reconstruction, builds on the metaphor of the city as a body politic, and places the events of the summer 2006 in a historical context which traces some of the processes in which Haret Hreik[3] came to boast a powerful body politic and how this body politic responded to the Israeli assaults.

Formation of a spatial body politic

As a neighbourhood, Haret Hreik witnessed a major transformation during the first years of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1983), when Beirut's division in two antagonistic and religiously homogenous units resulted in ousting the majority of its primarily Christian dwellers. Haret Hreik and surrounding areas became the refuge of thousands of Shiite families displaced from other quarters of the city or from the country's south that had fallen under Israeli occupation in 1978.[4] During this decade, it rapidly transformed from a green, low density suburban neighbourhood into a congested area where most construction violated urban regulations that dictated moderate land exploitation ratios. This urbanization was controlled by a handful of developers and was fuelled by the desire to accumulate capital and by dire housing needs in a war-torn and unaffordable city.

Haret Hreik, Beirut, 15 August 2006

PHOTO BY MONA HARB, 2006

The formation of a popular social and cultural foundation that could sustain an Islamic political movement capable of military resistance to Israel's occupation of South Lebanon probably began with the establishment of the *Hawzas* (or religious study groups) around 1984[5] and continued soon after, and in the face of neglect by the state authorities, with the organization of service provision in the southern suburbs of Beirut (e.g. garbage collection, drinking water provision, maintenance of sewer systems). During the late 1980s–early 1990s, Hizbullah's political headquarters and the main offices of an array of social organizations affiliated to it were established in Haret Hreik. Over time, many linkages were created between this social and political organization and the neighbourhood, generating an "economy of Islamic resistance" there.

These developments modified the character of the neighbourhood. For one, Hizbullah's security apparatus gradually imposed itself: streets surrounding the main political headquarters (*Majlis al-Shura*) were gated to form its "security quarters" (*murabba' al-amni*); armed security staff began patrolling in front of the houses and offices of its leaders; researchers and journalists visiting the neighbourhood were required to obtain special permits from the Party; and visitors were frequently questioned about their business there. Culturally and socially, the neighbourhood began to display the political and religious orientation of the community supporting Hizbullah, with the closure of liquor stores, night restaurants, bars, movie houses, and other entertainment considered immoral. Furthermore, neighbourhood streets were plastered with signs and posters celebrating the presence of the Islamic Resistance and its martyred heroes while advertisement billboards conformed to religious guidelines. Many streets were renamed after heroes and martyrs of the Islamic Resistance. Similarly, people increasingly adopted a religious dress code, and apartment buildings began to be fitted with curtains to shield household interiors from eyes in neighbouring buildings. I do not mean to suggest, as it is sometimes claimed, that Haret Hreik was hence "Hizbullah territory." Like everywhere else, space is the subject of contention and resistance to this appropriation was visible everywhere. Yet, the Islamic resistance had clearly taken root, deeply altering the character of the neighbourhood and delineating it as a space in the city with a clear identity.

Reconstruction of Haret Hreik

In this context, authority over reconstruction of Haret Hreik this past year carried more symbolism than anywhere else in Lebanon and was hotly contested. The central government immediately announced its intention to take charge, as declarations abounded about ending "years of a state within a state" in reference to Hizbullah's control over particular areas in Lebanon. On the other hand, Hizbullah's leader, Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah also made a public "solemn" promise that Haret Hreik will be rebuilt "more beautiful than it was" and Hizbullah's members

recurrently described a prompt reconstruction of the neighbourhood as another "victory" for the Party. Many wondered in the months that followed the war how this reconstruction would play itself out, especially in the context of an ongoing political standoff between the government and a Hizbullah-led opposition which has suspended central government agencies and the Parliament since November 2006.

As a planner, urban researcher, and citizen of this city I became interested in how this conflict influenced the ability of residents to take part in the reconstruction of their neighbourhood. The issues presented here emerged from my ongoing interaction with the neighbourhood and my frustration vis-à-vis the governance of a post-war reconstruction which I have come to believe forecloses the opportunities for public debate and for dwellers to intervene as partners in their making of their living environment.

The position of the state

A public commission was established in the days following the war and included representatives from public planning agencies and local political parties (including Hizbullah). This commission was however rapidly caught in the wider political standoff: it only met a few times and its final recommendations were never adopted. Faithful to a neoliberal tradition in public governance that conceptualizes the role of the public actor as an entrepreneur whose task is to attract foreign investment rather than as a manager of space or a service provider, the central government retracted developing reconstruction plans for the area when it became clear that Hizbullah would stand in the way of any redevelopment plan that could displace dwellers. The Council for Development and Reconstruction, the central planning agency in the country that had orchestrated much of the post-civil war reconstruction, was sidelined directly by the Prime Minister's office in favour of the Higher Relief Commission. Thus, the state conceptualized its role in reconstruction as "relief"; its involvement would be limited to paying (rather generous) financial compensation to those who had lost their homes, while the management of reconstruction would be left to individual homeowners and contractors. Hence, there will be no strategy to conceptualize or compensate for damage to the public domain or to introduce direly needed open and communal spaces that form the heart of any community.[6] This was well in line with the post-civil war reconstruction of the country where public efforts were concentrated in large-scale developmental projects (e.g. redevelopment of Beirut downtown, the construction of an international airport) while social policy was essentially reduced to paying indemnities to households displaced during the war.

In the months that followed, even relief proved to be more challenging than expected. Compensation was delayed as the legal requirements for establishing clear ownership titles clashed with the grey zones of real life where multiple inheritances in large families and unprofessional market developments produced discrepancies in national property records. Furthermore, the reconstruction still lacks a legal framework: while most dwellers had adjusted their buildings' legal status in 1994 by virtue of a regularization law and in exchange of penalties, they are not entitled to rebuild outside building regulations if these buildings are demolished. New planning regulations have to be issued if reconstruction is to proceed without dramatically de-populating the area. These however require approvals from the Parliament which has been suspended by the political standoff.

The Hizbullah project

Meanwhile, history continues to repeat itself in Beirut's suburbs as Hizbullah emerges as the planning body developing the neighbourhood's reconstruction plan. The party has established a private development company named Waad (or Promise) in reference to the commitment made by Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah to rebuild Haret Hreik for its community. Six architects, all of them university professors with no necessary affiliation to the party, were asked to develop a reconstruction plan with firm instructions not to change the fabric, density, and general organization of the neighbourhood. It is on the basis of this plan that Waad has now commissioned a number of architectural offices to redesign buildings, with strict criteria to observe the same footprints, building heights, and lot boundaries for every building, thus replicating the environment that was generated by profit-driven processes during the years of civil war. While Waad goes the extra-mile to present an image of religious inclusiveness and open-mindedness by involving architects of several confessions in re-drawing the buildings, the actual decision about the modalities of reconstruction were taken early on by the political party who determined that there will be no de-densification of the area and that the overall reconstruction will generally reproduce the pre-war fabric and its concomitant problems of poor ventilation, little natural lighting, and absence of public space.

Moreover, local actors have been excluded from this reconstruction planning. This includes the Haret Hreik Municipality which, though closely allied to Hizbullah, has been sidelined from the project's making; none of its members were included in the plan formulation and it has no representative in Waad. Furthermore, the Municipality's efforts to improve the urban fabric of the neighbourhood by introducing more changes than was dictated by Hizbullah's central political authority were dismissed and have hence been abandoned. The same can be said about neighbourhood dwellers, 85% of whom have already signed documents conferring legal authority over collecting their compensation and constructing their new apartments to Hizbullah.[7] Among these dwellers are some of the developers who were historically credited for building the neighbourhood but have now lost authority over its making. Asked about why they have opted to sign away their legal rights, those interviewed argued that they had no choice in the current political context.

A legal proposition

Despite their differences, Hizbullah and the central government agree on the legal framework in which reconstruction will occur. The cabinet has already approved a legal proposal in principle which provides a temporary and exceptional permit for the dwellers to rebuild their houses "as they were," even if in violation of current public urban and building regulations. If this arrangement is approved by the legislative body, dwellers will obtain a short-term entitlement to build "illegal" houses, while the exclusive urban planning framework that generated this illegality in the first place will not be revised. These citizens are hence tolerated rather than accepted and granted a lower-than-normal entitlement to participate in the production of the city.[8] In the context of the southern suburbs of Beirut, an area that has been historically stigmatized as "illegal" and largely condemned in popular press and public discourse as such,[9] a truncated entitlement strengthens the community's perception that it is unwanted in the city and that it needs solid political backing in order to retain the precarious entitlement it has obtained. As a result, the community's dependence on Shiite political parties who are able to provide this backing is strengthened further while its relation with the state continues to be mediated through these political parties. Conversely, public agents are able to, whenever they see fit, recite the refrain of "illegality"… every time they opt to attack political opposition through the window of the "illegal" communities they protect.[10]

A new body politic?

So what do the events of the past year tell us about how the body politic responded to the Israeli attack? It is certainly premature to draw conclusions but, one year later, it seems that the threatened body politic has responded by further reducing the spaces of contestation. In attempting to re-secure a home in the city, dwellers have to manoeuvre in the intersection of two powerful actors whose respective approaches to urban governance have concurred to foreclose their possibilities for taking charge of the making and organization of their living spaces.

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Notes

1. "Fatal strikes: Israel's indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Lebanon," *Human Rights Watch*, 3 August 2006.
2. D. Harvey, "The City as Body Politic," in *Wounded Cities*, ed. J. Schneider and I. Susser (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 25–46.
3. It is possible to construct the entire southern suburbs of Beirut under this same narrative. However, as the political centre of this suburb, it is specifically Haret Hreik that underwent this history.
4. According to a survey of the Ministry of Housing conducted in 1983, 80% of the neighbourhood's original dwellers had fled by 1983 (*As-Safir Newspaper*, 9 July 1983).
5. W. Charara, *Dawlat Hizb'Allah. Loubnan Moujtaman Islamiyyan* (Beirut: Dar an-Nahar, 1996).
6. Fawaz and Ghandour, *The Reconstruction of Haret Hreik: Design Options for Improving the Livability of the Neighborhood* (Beirut: AUB-RU publication, 2007).
7. Meeting with Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah held on 13 November 2006.
8. P. Chaterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
9. M. Harb, "La Dâhiye de Beyrouth: Parcours d'une Stigmatisation Urbaine, Consolidation d'un Territoire Politique," *Genèses*, no. 51 (2003): 70–91.
10. Refer, for example, to PM Siniora's speech on 7 May 2007.