Of citizens and ordinary men: Political subjectivity and contestations of sectarianism in reconstruction-era Beirut

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Chapter 2:
Urban politics in the margins of reconstruction

Having surveyed the general Beiruti scene in the previous chapter, we move into my first research site, al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq. Following up on the preceding chapter’s theme of territorialization, this chapter approaches the neighbourhood from a particular angle: to understand the way the neighbourhood is made as geographical entity, in the morphology of both its social tissue and urban fabric. It includes discussion of themes common to urban studies such as the politics of space (struggles over the power to claim and shape the identity of and the action within space and place), that quintessential Marxist concept of the production of space (closely tied to the preceding, but more specifically within an analysis of capitalist mechanisms of accumulation), and the tactics and strategies that residents employ to navigate the threats and opportunities that both the politics and production of space presents them. I discuss these themes in order to situate the neighbourhood and its people, to show whether and how it might fit in ‘territorialized’ politics, and whether and how that may translate into residents’ political imagination.

Discovering Khandaq Al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq (Arabic for what may be translated as ‘the deep trench’22) is a neighbourhood that is centrally located, just south of Downtown, with three major thoroughfares flanking it to the north, south and east. Yet, it appears to occupy a marginal position in the city’s public life. Consider the narratives in the following journalistic descriptions of the neighbourhood. It doesn’t figure too often in newspaper articles, which in itself is not unusual for a working-class

22 Etymological explanations vary: whether it was because the road called al-khandaq al-ghamiq actually functioned as a trench or gutter for rains travelling downhill along the walls of the Bachoura cemetery, or because it’s an allusion to the depression of the neighbourhood relative to the two flanking hills of the neighbourhoods Achrafiye and Zoqaq al-Blat.
neighbourhood, but in the few features in which the neighbourhood does figure prominently, it is conveyed in the prose of travel literature, the language of the explorer covering strange and unknown territory. For instance, in a series of articles that present a ‘survey’ of poverty in Lebanon, one instalment covers Khandaq. The article opens thus:

Al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq can be likened only to itself. It is a gutter [khandaq] murky with poverty and steeped [‘amīq ‘amaq: ‘very deep’, a play on the synonymous ghamīq] in social and economic woes, full of indignation towards the state, whose Ministry for Social Affairs fails to consider the plight of the deprived citizen. In this gutter pains begin and never end. Its alleyways are full of bitterness, the fissures of its crumbling buildings tell stories of abandonment, and the ancient, dark stairways emit the smell of disability and sickness. (An-Nahar, 1996-11-11, Mary Zuhrub)

The confrontation with unexpected poverty and neglect often translates into a narrative frame of the striking difference between Khandaq and its surroundings. Rahif Fayyad, an architect who has often participated in public debates about the (architectural) history and future of the city, wrote a series of articles in which he describes his wonderings through the older neighbourhoods of the city. When he comes to Khandaq, he can’t help but notice “a rude rupture” between what the area once was, before the war, and what is it is now, bereft of “rehabilitation and renovation, lost amid neglect”. When he moves into the neighbourhood, “the generalized deterioration manifests itself in a surreal, perplexing scene (mashhad suriali, ‘ajīb)” (As-Safir, 2002-11-01).

A portrait of the neighbourhood in the respectable, left-leaning newspaper As-Safir is structured along the same lines. The article opens with a description of the same street that Fayyad depicted, but now with scenes of war, including men from the Biqaa (an eastern province (in)famous for its military training camps), sporting kuffiyas and setting up a road block. The scene subsequently turns out to be part of a set for a film about the Lebanese war, but narratively of course, the effect is to place the area back in the days of war. The article goes on to situate the neighbourhood:

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23 This unfamiliarity is also reflected in my own experiences: few people I encountered had heard of it and many expressed surprise at my geographical explications.

24 yudī ‘wasat al-ihmāl – one could also read this as a pun on wasat al-tijārī, the business centre, another common name for city centre; the translation would then read “the centre of neglect is lost”.

Syriac street is one of Khandaq al-Ghamiq’s streets in Bachoura. Its lower end culminates in the Fouad Chehab bridge, by which it is brutally cut off. Before the [construction of the] bridge, the street continued until it reached the centre [al-balad]. The war destroyed much [nalat minhu], but after Solidere, the street was divided into two parts, while retaining the single name. The first part, before the bridge, stayed the same, and the second, lucky part became part of the centre [i.e., Solidere]. A luxurious hotel arises on it now. It doesn’t take after its other half (al-shārīʿ ʿla yishbah tatimatahu). (2007-04-19, As-Safir, Jihad Bazzi)

Again, the sense of contrast is vividly painted in a neighbourhood portrait, which focuses on the fate of the, generally quite poor, residents of a so-called hāwsh. A hāwsh is a collection of residences around a shared court – often, though not always, in an older building that was later subdivided into different homes (the subdivision is usually illegal or irregular, thus this is the kind of home for those with an uncertain hold on the city).

[The identity of the] area arises out of its extreme poverty, on a site where one would expect the willingness to invest millions of dollars. Let’s examine it up closer. This leads us to Thieves’ Alley. […] The inhabitants spend their evening sitting next to the wall of the [Bachoura] cemetery and spend hours of the night listening to the ‘nights of the new Downtown’. Their houses, or what pass for houses, are quite close to the centre of Beirut, which bustles with life deep into the night and rings its tunes of joy. The local kids clap, from where they are, to Beirut. And the adults spend their night clapping for their kids who dance to the music from ‘Downtown’.

How strange, this differentiated mingling across a few meters in Beirut between wealth and poverty, beauty and ugliness, development and obsolescence. (Sada al-Balad, 2005-10-16, Nawal Nasr)

**Dereliction and speculation in the old Christian neighbourhood** The authors of the newspaper clippings recurrently highlight the difference between the adjacent ‘downtown’ area, the site of the reconstruction, and Khandaq, the site of neglect. As will become clearer in the sections to follow, this is not an entirely honest depiction of the entire neighbourhood, as there is much more to it than that, even though the disjunction actu-
ally does resonate with many residents’ sense of their place in the city. The journalistic descriptions in fact focus on the old Christian neighbourhood, an area largely confined to the north-east corner of Khandaq (see map on following page). By the end of the 1960s it was inhabited mostly by Syriac Catholics and Armenians, though by that time a steady stream was trickling out of the neighbourhood, especially among the former. The Syriac Catholics had built this part of the neighbourhood. They had migrated, fled sometimes, to Beirut since 1810 and had come to constitute a critical mass roughly by the second half of that century. To consecrate and sustain their presence they built the St. George church (see picture for its carcass on page 48), in one of the main streets of Khandaq, which was finished in 1883. In 1900, the bifurcating street (‘Syriān street’) became the seat of the Patriarchate. However, when the Patriarch decided to move the seat to the south of the city in 1930, this initiated a slow movement out of Khandaq, primarily by those who could afford to do so. When in 1958, Saeb Salem orchestrated a (mostly Sunni) uprising against the presidency of Camille Chamoun, which also (obliquely) affected Khandaq, fighting may have accelerated the process.

However, as mentioned previously, the Christians, including the Armenians, left definitively only during the Two Year War. Soon they were replaced by Shia refugees from East Beirut and South Lebanon, who occupied their homes and stayed there throughout the war years. After the war, Khandaq, despite the heavy damages it sustained, was not included in the Solidere plan for reconstruction, whose southern limits were set to the Fouad Chehab boulevard. The refugees, due to the uncertainty of their situation, not knowing how long they would be able to stay in their homes, also did little to maintain or renovate their buildings. Between 2000 and 2004 the vast majority of the refugees were finally evicted (see further down in this chapter). This left an area that already looked decidedly shoddy, with war damages both light and severe, general dilapidation and empty plots, now abandoned. The scene would indeed be striking upon first encounter, as it was for the journalists.

26 In Chapter 4 I show how their sense of ‘neglect’ – on a Beiruti plane – also reflects back on their sense of their place in the country as a whole.

27 One of the greater Beiruti notable politicians of the pre-1975 era. Sunni and at some point tied to the Abdel Nasser’s brand of pan-Arabism.

28 While there were symbolic reasons to do so – the Reconstruction focused on ‘the heart of the city’, Downtown Beirut, architect Assem Salem, then head of the Order of Engineers, supposed the exclusion of Khandaq and similar areas was for simple financial calculations. “The money they [Solidere] were going to invest in it had to be limited – so the geographic limits were more imposed by financial conditions than by urban conditions. […] The aim of the project was simply a real estate investment. There was no political or reunification aim. This amount of land, this amount of money.” (Interview November 2009)
Yet, it is not completely abandoned. A retired officer of the internal security forces and his wife still live across from the now ruined church; Abu Fadi, once “the only Muslim in my street”, now squats an art nouveau building that is on the list of protected heritage, on the corner from the church. Then on the last side street before the Fouad Chehab bridge you will find Jammal, the *fawwāl*29. He runs his little restaurant from ‘the Armenian building’, which is empty but for one last family on the top floor, and a paper and printing company in the basement. The restaurant contains three small tables, a kitchen of 2x1 m., two small posters of Martyr’s Square – the main square in Downtown – from before the war, next to an old picture of the Pigeon Rock, a tourist attraction off the seaside boulevard (see picture on following page). Right next to the entrance, underneath the light switch, Jammal taped a business card he had someone fashion a few years ago, which he showed with what seemed to be a mix of pride and irony. He’d been considering the business card more seriously lately though. He needed to start thinking about delivery, in order to survive in these empty surroundings.

The consideration to extend the geographical reach of his customer base is not entirely unwarranted. It was in fact something of a surprise to me

29 The *fawwāl* prepares *fül* and *hummus* plates, out of fava beans and chick peas, for breakfast and lunch.
to find the *fūl* shop where it was, amidst the lifeless pocket-holed buildings and empty plots, overgrown or full of rubble. His three tables were almost never all full – his customers consisted of a number of loyal customers that came and look him up every once in a while, a few residents in the streets up towards the actual neighbourhood, where he delivered, and some of the Syrian workers who worked in the construction projects at the end of the street. But while these projects were only at the end of the street, whenever we gazed upon them, they seemed far away, as if they belonged to another world. It was always quiet near Jammal’s *fūl* shop. So he nearly always had time for a chat. And as our chats developed over the weeks, it turned out the construction projects were in fact a very real part of his life.

Jammal told tales of better times and the history of his restaurant. He inherited it from his father. In fact, he and his brother, who would help him out with smaller things, are the third generation *fūl* makers in the family. Still two other members of the family were in the business – one of them, an uncle, worked a few blocks up, in Zahrawi street, the main retail street in Khandaq. The other was in the nearby Basta neighbourhood. But they will be the last generation. Their children are going to school and will work in something better. *What future is there still in this *fūl* business,* he asked rhetorically and sighed. *The civil war has hurt us.* His father had
to close during the war years because the shop was located too close to the Green Line. Jammal went to work in a Lebanese fast-food restaurant in the Hamra district, but the family suffered a financial setback. It was the reason his brother was still single: business was decent back then and had the war not forced them to close, they would have been able to make enough money for his brother to be an interesting candidate, they would have been able to buy a place. There had already been talk between two families, but in the end the other family declined because of this very reason. After the war, they re-opened, and while business might not have been the way it once was, the area still had all the refugees living in it and the money was ok. Now, though, with the refugees gone, Jammal estimates that he has about half the customers he had in the direct post-war period. But the costs are still there – and they have increased even, just think of the costs of the electricity when I store my unsold foul beans overnight, in the fridge, or of the gas to heat them up again. (Why, just now, he wanted to go to Hawa Chicken, a poultry based butcher and supermarket chain, to get some kibbe for home: yesterday the price was still 7000LL and now 8,000LL – a price hike of a 1,000LL in the space of a day!)

However, more grave than all that, there had been a sword of Damocles hanging over his head since the building he rented his shop in was bought, at the time about 2 years prior, by someone who wanted to tear down the Armenian building and erect a tower. From there all the way to there, he pointed to the construction sites at the end of the street, and then to the far end of Khandaq on the other side, it’s all going to be towers. Over the past years he had been negotiating with the new owner about the amount of their eviction money. They were paying ‘old rent’, which means there is no natural end to the contract and they thus were protected from eviction. There are legal grounds upon which they could be evicted, but in such cases, the owner does have to give them a market-conform compensation (a certain percentage of the value of the property). Such negotiations are generally lengthy affairs with rather different perspectives of what a reasonable amount would be. Jammal told me that two years ago an expert (khabīr) had come to evaluate the property and determine their compensation. There are a number of such experts registered with the court and the latter calls upon them to make independent, neutral evaluations to settle the difference between owner and tenant. The expert had evaluated his ‘cut’ at “$70,000 or $80,000”; the new owner wanted to give no more than “$30,000 or 40,000”. Yet, he explained, there is big money in this project – this whole area will be a Solidere II, by which Jammal meant a large commercial centre with towers. (‘Solidere II’ is a term that circulates more widely in the neighbourhood, though its mean-
ing varied. For some, instead, it meant a new and pretty faux-historical residential neighbourhood.) A large-scale project, in other words, and he had heard that prices per m² had been up to $11,000. So the new owner must have a lot of money – still he wasn’t willing to pay the amount that was due to him – somewhere between $75,000 and $100,000, that is (rounding the expert’s estimate in his favour).

Whether it would be $40,000 or the hoped for $80,000 though, Jammal saw no possibility of opening up a new venue somewhere else with such money. Buying a place is out the question, that goes without saying. Still, even in terms of rent, he would have to pay at least $400 or $500 per month in Basta, just south of Khandaq; along the Bechara al-Khoury main road, where many sha`bi (popular, lower-class) cafés and ‘ovens’ have settled of late, it was $1,000. Then you have Monot street (just beyond Bechara al-Khoury, and a nightlife hotspot): someone opened up a similar place there, he’s made it look nice, but that man is also asking 6000LL for a plate – I can’t do that here (Jammal’s recently raised his price to 3500LL), people here won’t pay that kind of money. All of these options were not financially viable, in his opinion. And so, he saw no future for his children in fūl.

**Khandaq’s refugees and the politics of displacement** The preceding two sections tell a story of abandonment, speculation and uncertainty. These are three themes that will come up in different guises and permutations in this chapter (and the following two). I will develop these themes step by step. The first step is to attend to the scene of a kind of limbo above. While perhaps not “surreal”, it is still puzzling and demands some explication. In particular, what does it say about the status of territorial politics? If we want to understand that particular moment in the trajectory of the neighbourhood, obviously the war would be a good starting point. However, we should not consider simply ‘the war’ in general, but more particularly one of its consequences: displacement. Beirut grew explosively during the war years, because of displacement to the capital. It led to new burst of construction, primarily outside of the existing city, in the new ‘suburbs’, where undeveloped space was in relative abundance, and land rights were not quite clear, or could still be acquired relatively cheaply. Within the city itself, displacement led first of all to occupation of existing, mostly abandoned, housing stock. Later, older buildings and empty lots were replaced by new apartment towers as Beirut’s population continued to grow and the war economy generated surplus accumulation at the top of the militias that needed re-investment (see e.g.

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30 Not entirely unlikely, such were prices for high-end areas at the time.
Traboulsi 2007: 237). Both phases are represented in Khandaq, though I will only come to the second phase later on.

For now I focus on those refugees who found refuge in other people’s homes. The contrast between Khandaq and Beirut’s “Central Business District” comes out clearly with the differential treatment of the displaced after the war. The choice to focus reconstruction on the current Downtown perimeter only and not on the – equally damaged – Khandaq neighbourhood led to a quick ‘resolution’ of the refugee question (i.e. eviction) in the Solidere business district, and opened up the area for redevelopment.31 However, because Khandaq was left out, there was no such urgency and the question of its displaced population languished under political stalemates. This section recounts that history – the policy of return, the politics of the actual negotiations and its players, and the specific fate of the Khandaq refugees. This will show us a first glimpse of the ‘territorial status’ of the area.

The question of the displaced was one of the prime political issues directly after the war. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the ‘return to normal’ was paramount. In 1992 therefore, the Ministry for Displaced was set up. The Ministry had three goals: to facilitate 1) the eviction of displaced from squatted property; 2) the return of the property owners and 3) the mediation of conflict in instances of displacement due to particularly intense internecine conflict (such as between Druze and Christians in the Chouf mountain). The history of the implementation of this policy is rather fraught though. Two major fault lines ran through the Ministry – the controversy over Mount Lebanon between the Druze and Christians and the status of Sunni Beirut and their relation to the new Sunni political leader, Rafiq Hariri. Both caused a certain degree of paralysis in the execution of the Ministry’s mandate, as different factions fought over the power to channel the Ministry’s cash flow. Hariri therefore created the Fund for the Displaced, officially the executive organ of the Ministry, but factually autonomous (and devoid of statutes regulating its transparency). Its creation came out of the Hariri’s desire to direct money flows to his Sunni constituency outside of the purview of the Ministry. (Interview Fadi Aramouny, March 2012; cf. Leenders 2012: 116ff.). These conflicts slowed down the negotiation process for many cases, including those who lived in Khandaq.

31 When a new director ascended to the Fund for the Displaced in 1998 (cf. below), he did initiate a new program to renovate the façades of buildings whose owners could not be tracked. This included buildings in Khandaq. The project was aborted when a new government cut the money flow to the Fund. Had it been allowed to continue, these ‘investments’ into the area might have changed its subsequent urban fortunes.
In Khandaq, one estimate puts the number of displaced families living in Khandaq at 523, making a total of 3182 people (Faour 1993). Nawwar was one of those people. Before the war, as a young boy, Nawwar lived in Nabaa, a working-class suburb of East Beirut that many Shia had moved to over the preceding decades. Like all other Shia they left the area when the Phalanges embarked on clearing all of West Beirut of Muslims. Nabaa was evacuated with the mediation of emerging Shia leader Musa Sadr, without casualties. Nawwar’s family retreated to the South in 1975 and sought a way to return to Beirut in 1976, after the first round of fighting had died down. Nawwar had an uncle living in Khandaq who told his father there were houses, closed but empty, left behind by the Christians and they weren’t going to come back. Nawwar’s family was the first to open one of the Christian homes, he says. They were to be followed by many more, in total some 40 buildings were squatted in Khandaq, the majority of which had been owned or inhabited by Christians. While Nawwar’s family had heard of these potential houses through family, many were brought in by various figures of authority who themselves assumed the role of assigning families to buildings (and the apartments within them, and sometimes to rooms within the apartments). Through a mukhtar32, a local big man, a party or militia, people were guided to new dwellings – whether in the name of humanitarian assistance in dire times or in expectation of political fidelity. Nawwar by that time was well-installed though. Over the course of the war he built up his life there, he met a girl he liked, from a family that had previously lived in the fancier Sin al-Fil suburb, also in East Beirut, and they got married on the rooftop of the ‘Armenian building’. She first moved in with him in his family’s house, but soon, probably as arranged before, her uncle moved to the United States and bequeathed their house to them. This is where they lived until 2004.

In the period between the official end to the war in 1990 and 2004 there had been several attempts by the state to re-establish normality and return the Christian houses to their rightful owners and allow the Shia to return to their own old houses. The political conflicts within the Ministry’s in part explain why it took 12 years for the Ministry to succeed in evicting the Shia from their Khandaq residences. A second factor of delay was the parties’ involvement in the various forms of negotiation between displaced squatters and the Ministry and Fund. Just like the parties had arranged for many people to find new dwellings during the war, they were also often managing their departure from these buildings. They did so for the

32 A local representative, see next chapter.
same reasons they found homes for them in the first place (as described in Chapter 1): on the one hand, as fodder in political competition, as Yahya observes: “The question of their return was transformed into a bargaining chip in the hands of these now institutionalized militias” (1993: 136f.). On the other hand, it was undoubtedly part of establishing political relations at the level of the constituency – the service (here, housing) for loyalty game. In order to thus support its constituency, the parties sat at the negotiation table, but they also showed up as muscles in the street (interview Fadi Aramouny, March 2012; interview anonymous employee of the Ministry for the Displaced, January 2012), when the Ministry (and the internal security forces) showed up with the eviction notice, forcing the Ministry to retreat to contact the party member charged with refugee affairs.

Several of these elements also come out in Nawwar’s story. There had been evictions in Khandaq over the course of the 1990s. Most of these evictions took place at the initiative of individual buildings owners – though none of the Christian owners, to my knowledge33 – only Sunni or (new) Shia owners. Also, it appears as though some of the refugees accepted the open offers by the Ministry to apply for their compensation. Until 1999, the standard sum for compensation stood at $15,000. But the people who accepted these sums were a minority. People’s expectations about their own eviction appear to have been influenced by the high compensation amounts that were dispensed for the displaced from the ‘Solidere’ area. As Nawwar explained, the situation was uncertain. We didn’t know if we could get more money. And so they waited. Then in 1999, Hariri was temporarily ousted from power and a government came to power that tried to loosen his grip on Lebanon, and a new director also ascended to the throne of the Fund of the Displaced. His mandate and personal goal was to finally ‘close the files’ of the replaced. In that year, the Ministry issued a warning to the displaced of al-Khandaq for them to leave the premises within a short delay; the newspaper reporting (As-Safir, 1999-08-25, Jaber) on the warning suggests it came in the middle of failing negotiations between the Ministry and the displaced. The Fund’s new policy for all displaced, home owners and squatters, was to dole out 5,000 as recompense for eviction and $8,000 for the renovation of one’s (reclaimed) house. This was a $10,000 step down from previous sums issued by the Fund, which will sure to have been a factor in their resistance (through their party representatives) to this new regime. The official reasons cited for their refusal

33 Though it appears (cf. Al-Akhbar, 2012-07-16, Muhsen) that in 2000 people were already evicted from the church’s properties.
were that the compensations could not afford a new apartment, especially considering the government hadn’t built new affordable ones as promised; that for those from the South it was unlikely they could go back anyway (as the region was still under Israeli occupation); and that there were several “irregularities” in the administration of the affair, and some people feared they would not receive compensation if they would leave within the term set by the government.

Thus, nothing happened in 1999 and the pressure was off the cooker for a while when the new Hariri government defunded the project in 2000. There was talk about moving the project of collective evacuation forward, but it was not until 2004 that something actually happened. I was unable to find out what changed precisely (party representatives were not available for comment). The deal was the following though: a committee of representatives to the displaced was formed, a common practice especially on the village level, and they were responsible for handing in a list of the families living in the remaining 35 buildings. Many families registered more families living in a building than actually present, in order to receive larger benefits (as supposedly happened with refugees in the Solidere area as well). Nawwar for example, registered a friend’s family and thus obtained $10,000 in compensation (minus a $500 cut for his friend). (Most likely the Fund was well aware of – and familiar with – this but closed an eye because it was part of the resolution of the problem.)

The war-time displacement, the prolonged presence of the refugees post-bellum because of the limits of the Solidere reconstruction plan, then the political stalemates in the Ministry for the Displaced, all explain in large part the puzzling contrast of the area with its immediate environment. What remains to be explained is why after the evictions of 2004, the area wouldn’t have been rebuilt. I deal with this question in a following section. For the moment, I want to dwell on the fact that after covering for the displaced for over a decade, the Shia parties then abandoned that policy, working out a compromise solution. In so doing, they abandoned the logic of territorialisation as we have come to understand it in Chapter 1, where the defence of residential presence was a stake of the highest political charge. In the next section I want to draw out some implications for this point.

**Territoriality beyond the divided city** With the parties relinquishing control over this part of the neighbourhood with their agreement to the terms of eviction, the area strikes a dissonant chord in relation to the more well-known cases of urban politics discussed in the previous chapter. Here, the parties appear to abandon the logic of territorialisation (rather
than continuing to pursue with other means). That logic knows various expressions: as a (quasi)-military strategy, to control key areas; as defence of sectarian presence in a given space to service needs to the constituency; or to use such presence to shore up claims in the political playing field. In terms of the first, it’s somewhat inconclusive, for despite the evictions, up until the time of my fieldwork at least, the parties still policed and used the space. In terms of the second and third dimensions, that is not what we see. Most of the evicted refugees left the neighbourhood, as far as I was able to establish. Nawwar was one of the ‘lucky ones’. While they spent the compensation money relatively quickly on rent in a Basta apartment (at the time the family was living off his $500 civil servant salary), a local Hizbullah representative was able to house them in a building, once appropriated by the municipality and now empty, and which he now managed. Otherwise, Nawwar was able to name very few families that still lived there. According to a resident of a building bordering on the old Christian neighbourhood, people had left for the South, for the southern suburbs, and he knew some families who had still not been able to find stable residence.

It must be noted that the eviction strikes an equally dissonant cord with the perception of the (Shia) residents of the neighbourhood. To many, the neighbourhood is indeed a ‘territory’ that is in need of defence. This comes out clearly in the way the real-estate developments since the eviction are talked about. In order to understand residents’ perspectives though, we need to understand some of the context and what kind of developments we are talking about precisely. At the time of my fieldwork, Beirut was in the middle of a real-estate boom34, which had sent real-estate prices skyward and produced a certain feverish scramble for plots to build (mostly “luxury”) residential and commercial real-estate.35

Prices in the high-end sector varied at that point between US$3,000 and US$10,000 per m² (Krijnen & Fawaz 2010: 117). One would thus expect developers to capitalize on these plots on such a prime location. In fact,

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34 To give an indication, according to a recent study by (the Lebanese) Bank Audi, real-estate sales in December 2009 were up over 40% compared to the same month in the preceding year (to $1.25 billion) (cited in Wierzborski 2010: 10). Beginning in the 1990s, successive governments have made real-estate into one of the key economic sectors in Lebanon, through (tax) subsidies and measures that increase the leeway of developers. In the 2000s, a number of further factors coalesced to produce a major real-estate boom – among them, the shift of a portion from the investment in economically unstable Gulf countries into Lebanon, and particularly a change in national policy for the Lebanese banking sector – endowed with large surpluses – that necessitated them to seek new venues of investments.

35 See Krijnen and Fawaz (2010) and Wierzborski (2010) for insight into the production of the high-end sector (both the kind of products and the institutional framework and politics behind their production).
the ‘limbo’ was somewhat deceptive, because acquisitions had been tak-
ing place since 2004. Records I obtained from the national registry show
that indeed properties were sold, and mostly to one buyer who is iden-
tified, at least in a few newspaper articles that I was able to dig up, as
a ‘Syrian businessman’ with connections to Hariri circles. The business-
man used a number of daughter companies – registered to members of
his extended family – to buy up different plots, mostly likely to make it
seem different buyers were active in the area (in other ways as well, dis-
simulation seemed part of the business model). A business partner and
son-in-law I contacted over the phone declined any other comment than
that for the moment the market wasn’t ready for their plans.

Residents’ were aware that things were happening, but they occupied
a disadvantaged place in this ‘knowledge economy’. Their speculations
generally revolved around the notion of “Solidere II”, mentioned above.
According to this understanding, Solidere itself, or at least people in
Solidere, would be responsible for the imminent redevelopment of the
area. Indeed there do appear to be some connections – given the busi-
nessman’s apparent proximity to the Hariri family, and that the partner I
spoke to had previously contracted for one of the most prestigious office
buildings in Solidere. Yet, none of the residents seemed to possess any
detailed knowledge such as this, except for one, a successful local busi-
nessman, who was able to tell me this one character was ‘buying up all
the lands and then closing them’ (i.e. building walls or fences around the
perimeters of the plots [see picture on page 58]) – information he acquired
during a business lunch.

The combination of, first, the ‘removal’ of Shia inhabitants from the old
Christian area and, second, the rumours about the investors and their
intentions that are about to ‘take over’ the area contribute to a generally
shared discourse of an embattled neighbourhood. These tie into discours-
es of the territorial city that circulate more widely in the city. Hariri’s par-
ty, the Future Movement, would, according to such rumours, buy up as
much land as possible in order to secure the city for the Sunna. He would
have his allies, and the name of Saudi Prince and Supreme Investor
Waleed bin Talal has been designated as the man behind impending take-
overs from the far southern suburbs to Khandaq al-Ghamiq. In the latter
case, his name is sometimes tied to the “Solidere II” project. The threat
of that project, as perceived by some, is sectarian (against us Shia), class-
based (against us poor) and against residents in general (“they only build
offices nowadays”). In the first vein, the local Hizbullah representative
mentioned earlier assured me that indeed Hariri & Co. have set their
eyes on Khandaq for a long time, at least since 1990, wanting to clear the
Shia from the area between Downtown all the way to Ras al-Nabaa (a neighbourhood to the southeast of Khandaq). Fortunately, he added, Hizbullah prevented that project from ever happening, by buying the lands

However, their political leadership appears to have taken a different stance. This points to the transformation in the political (playing) field since the civil war. While on-the-ground confrontation and control over territories was a central strategy to effectuate desired political outcomes during the war (whether that be the accomplishment of demographic changes in these territories or reform in the political and state system), as soon as weapons were no longer an accepted recourse, territorial control had to be evaluated against what could be attained through state and government. Thus, while certain territories were still defended, as we have seen in the previous chapter, other territories were given up in subservience to new political realities. The Shia parties allowed the claim

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36. Such projected developments do not connote a negative image for everyone. For some, a minority to my sense, impending developments are not a ‘hostile take-over’ but a welcome sanitization of the neighbourhood of its ‘dirty’ elements – the poor, the squatters, the criminals. A ‘Solidere II’ would spread class and order, and clear away the dirt and unsightliness, illegality and the (petty) criminality of troubled youth.

37. I was not able to find any evidence to that extent.
over downtown by the Hariri people, in large part because there was sim-
ply no space for the ‘rights’ of displaced people in public discourse and
to insist upon the existence of such rights through military imposition
was no longer an option. Thus smooth evacuation of refugees became
a bargaining chip for the exchanging. We must see the deal for the dis-
placed of Khandaq in a similar light. The competition by Druze, Christian
and Sunni powers over the Ministry’s cash and political direction made
blocking a resolution of their fate relatively cost-free. After 2000, when
Hariri regained his grip over government and the Ministry in particular
a number of things changed vis-à-vis the preceding decade. The Ministry
itself was able to carry out some of its work in Khandaq, at a slow because
poorly financed pace, in the eye of the storm of more politically charged
‘files’ (such as conflict claims between Christians and Druze in a num-
ber of Chouf mountain villages). Also, a new understanding developed
between Hariri and Hizbullah’s leadership (Hasan Nasrallah in particu-
lar). (Please note that for the following, I have no basis more reliable than
my own meandering conversations with a few informants who, while
generally well versed in the arts of political commentatorship, have no
first-hand experience of these matters.) In terms of larger political issues,
Hizbullah agreed to leave economic policy to Hariri’s people – during
the 1990s the party had positioned itself as the champion of socio-econo-
mic rights a number of times. In return, Hariri agreed to not meddle
with Hizbullah’s resistance activities – the latter’s increasing military
capabilities had become cause for concern with other political group-
ings. The gentleman’s agreement assured each side what was most pre-
cious to it. As a corollary, however, both parties also agreed on Hariri’s
claim to municipal Beirut and Hizbullah’s claim over the southern sub-
urbs. Hariri’s pretension to the throne of the new Sunni za’im of Beirut
was indubitable and widely recognized, while we have already seen how
Hizbullah has defended its right to administer the affairs of the suburbs.
The fact finally that, given the Lebanese post-war political imagination
(‘return to normal’), the status quo of the refugees became increasingly
indefeasible a decade after the end of the war, will also have contributed
to the ultimate resolution of the Khandaq files.
The transformation of the political playing field and thus of territoriality
as a political logic therefore has to be seen firstly within the aforemen-
tioned differentiated understanding of ‘territoriality’ and, secondly, with-
in the context in which any kind of territorial strategy may or may not be
felicitous. In this particular context, the ‘territorial’ defence of a (demo-
graphic) presence was given up, even if the territorial consolidation of
relations with the constituency was maintained, as will become clear in
the following chapters, within *the heart* of the neighbourhood. That leaves two questions: as we move into that heart, i.e., the lived and lively section of the neighbourhood, do political actors intervene in the production of space as they have done in the housing of displaced persons and in the reconstruction projects? And what of a territorialized political imagination by the residents? Do we see a similar politicization of the identity of urban space? In the case of the old Christian neighbourhood, it is clear that both insecurity and uncertainty form the backdrop to this speculative type of territorial imagination. Discussing the residential state of things in the heart of Khandaq should provide a good point to start addressing these questions.

**Coping with residential insecurity** Residents’ sense of ‘embattlement’ is on the one hand but one manifestation of a more widely shared ‘territorial lesson’ (Sarkis 1993) that Beirutis learned during the civil war: the city is rife with rumours about sectarian competition over ‘our’ and ‘their’ space. But, on the other hand, there is also a – somewhat less pronounced – class dimension to that sense – that it is the poor that consistently draw the short end of the stick in this city (and this country). “Solidere” (II) allows for both forms of critique – at least for the working-class Shia in the neighbourhood: it’s a Sunni take-over of the city and it’s only for the rich. That latter part is actually shared across the social and sectarian board – or at least among working and middle classes. ‘Before (the war)’, so the complaint goes, ‘there was a place for the lower, the middle and higher classes in the city centre. Now it’s only for the higher classes’.  

This notion draws on the debates about the reconstruction (of the downtown area) and the widely shared idea that the new city centre was to ‘heal the wounds of the war’ and become the oecumenical heart of the nation (cf. Chapter 1). As it transpired, however, people will observe, the current centre caters primarily to tourism, high-class entertainment and ‘luxury living’. Yet, the discourse is also in part rooted in real experiences of the increasing cost of living. While the metropolitan area of Beirut has grown and is growing, the population of municipal Beirut has likely actually gone down (at least according to a tabulation by Charbel Nahas). Beirut has become increasingly unaffordable for a large section of the population, over the course of the last decade especially, and spectacu-

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38 Sometimes, the argument is then extrapolated to cover the entire country.  
larly so since 2006.\textsuperscript{40} The only affordable spaces can therefore be found further and further out of the city. Many people in Khandaq and across the city – virtually all those who have not bought property for themselves or for their children – are therefore in a precarious position on the real-estate market and worry about maintaining their place in the neighbourhood and the city at large.

In this second half of the chapter, I discuss changing residential conditions in Khandaq by going into both the histories and experiences of residents as well as into the work of developers of ‘low-end’ construction projects. I start out with a few sketches of residents’ histories that should give an indication of what the housing market looks like at the lower end. I paint a picture of the various kinds of positions that neighbourhood inhabitants take up in the housing market, such as long term residents, parents who look to the housing needs of their offspring, young families, former refugees. All relate differently to the challenges of the current market. Then I move on to the locally active developers and their impact on the area. Together, residents’ experiences and developers’ activities allow me to move into a discussion of the politics of territory and the territorialization of the political imagination.

Abu Rabih (aged about 70) is a long-term resident of the area. A small and lean man, he still works in his small carpenter’s shop, at a retired man’s pace. On the street, visiting his carpenter neighbours, he presented an amiable and calm face, with a chuckle always at the ready. He was born in the south, but his father died early and so they were forced to go Beirut to find work. They settled in Zoqaq al-Blat, the neighbourhood to the west of Khandaq. His younger brother worked at a butcher’s shop and Abu Rabih worked with him for a while, but he didn’t like the smell. He worked in a sweets store for a while but didn’t like that either. He then went to work with his uncle in carpentry. This is where he found his profession. In his apprentice years he alternated between an Armenian carpenter and his uncle, but after eight years the opportunity came up to take over a carpenter’s shop in Khandaq, when its previous occupant had died and his son didn’t want it. Khandaq al-Ghamiq street was (and to a modest extent still is) a centre for carpentry in the city – with a number of carpenters housed next to each other. Abu Rabih had been in his shop then since 1963. He paid a yearly rent of 2.100.000LL ($1400). His younger brother left Beirut, dividing his time between Saudi Arabia and the South. His older brother did

\textsuperscript{40} Nahas later compared Beirut with Lyon and Marseilles, finding that while the minimum wage is at 25\% of what it is in France, the average price per square meter is at 123\% (Al-Akhbar, 2014-02-14, Wehbe).
some odd things, including working as a taxi driver, but died young. So he and his mother then moved to Khandaq together, just in front of the shop, in a building that dates back to the late 1930s. At first they rented, but the owner, a wealthy man who was linked to the port and had several buildings, both in Khandaq and the rest of Beirut, wanted to leave the country and sold his properties. He sold Abu Rabih’s building to two investor-partners, who proceeded to sell the individual apartments. This was all at the very tail end of the war, the situation was still not quite settled down, so prices were low. Abu Rabih took the offer and bought the apartment at $5,000. (Many bought it then with him. Others bought only the following year, for $15,000, then some still the next year for $25,000. The steep rise in prices reflected the crystallization of the situation in the country – the war was really over this time – and the beginnings of the post-war real-estate boom.)

At the time Abu Rabih did not have the $5,000, so he borrowed the money from various family members. It took him 10 years to repay – whenever he had money he would pay, whenever he didn’t, he didn’t. He would never consider going to a bank. They’re criminals (ḥāramiyya). They take interest so you pay double the price and when you don’t pay, they take your house! And not just in Lebanon. In the entire world. See what’s happening in the US. They foreclosed on this 60 years old man (sakkaru haqqa). And the state isn’t defending its citizens. In fact, at least in Lebanon, it’s making it worse. It puts taxes on everything except on the rich: when you smoke, pay for fuel, the electricity – all taxes! His generalized mistrust of institutions and other actors that detain money and information also came out of his experience of trying to go through a middleman – a simsar – in order to find a house for a friend. In principle, simsars are officially registered individuals, whose business are (lightly) regulated through the state (though the word also covers a culturally recognized position that anyone could theoretically take up in any given time or domain). But the dealings he had with the man had been quite a disappointment. They are criminals just as much – he takes [a commission] from the one and from the other [side]! So he told his friend to take care of it himself. His conclusion: al-tājir w-al-fājir wahlad – the merchant and the reprobate are one and the same.

A frequent conversation partner for Abu Rabih is Abu Mahmoud. Abu Mahmoud is a taxi driver, roughly of the same age as Abu Rabih, and only worked on call, so he often had quite a bit of time to spend in between rides. Abu Mahmoud also came to Beirut as a young boy, when he was about five years old. His father had a job in the souqs – you know, down in Solidere41, he indicates, pointing toward downtown – but he died when he was still young.

41 A vernacular name for the city centre. A related note on indexicals: one goes ‘down’ to the city centre. One goes ‘up’ to the suburbs, or the village in the mountains.
Also, like Abu Rabih, he stayed with his mother in the house they had rented, while all his brothers and sisters went elsewhere, the latter to Australia. His sons and daughters have gone in the meanwhile as well; his two sons have been living in Zambia for the past 15 years. His house belonged to the sister of the well-known mukhtar Makki. Makki recently sold the plot, in name of the family’s heirs. When parents bequeath real-estate to the next generation, custom has it that it is sub-divided into (gender unequal) shares among the sons and daughters. If this process is not handled properly, for instance when the inheritors have no (usufructuary) interest in the real-estate anymore, the number of property holders soon reaches unmanageable quantities. This was also the case of the Makki family and so mukhtar Makki, most intimately familiar with the area and with a large network, was charged to negotiate a sale. The building was then sold to one of the ‘Syrian businessman’s’ subsidiary companies, registered in – and bearing – his daughter’s name. The rent for the apartment was fixed in 1965 and now amounts to some $80 per month, an amount that he now paid to the company. However, he knows very well that the company did not buy the plot to collect his meagre rent. At some point, they will start the procedures to evict him and his wife. But he hadn’t heard from the company at all so far, so he waits.

In the meanwhile, Abu Rabih’s oldest son – Rabih – will one day inherit the apartment. There weren’t too many alternatives for him. He had a steady job, working back-office in Hamra, and he sometimes helped out with the Saleh brothers, who operate one of largest newspaper and magazine distribution companies in the country, up the street from the mosque next to his house. None of this would be sufficient however to buy a house in today’s market conditions. This meant that his life was partly on hold. It is quite difficult to marry, for instance, unless you can ‘open a house’ – start a family in a new home (a common problem across the region [and beyond], see e.g. Koning 2009 and Singerman 1995 for two case-studies from Cairo). The forbidding prices in the housing market were therefore taken quite seriously. Abu Hasan, a semi-retired carpenter some 50 meter up the street, who still traded in used wood and occasionally carried out a job in his neighbour’s workshop, even saw cause for revolution in today’s youth’s insecurity. This country is ruled by greedy bosses, who suck as much out of the state for their own profit, rather than work for the interest of the people. In the meanwhile, there are no decent jobs for my son. So he can’t afford a house. And if he can’t afford a house, he can’t marry. In such conditions, what’s my son to stop from revolting? 42 It would only be what these profiteering political criminals would have coming to them…

42 His son actually managed to find a half-decent job – by Lebanese standards – soon after, working for one of the region’s largest supermarket chains. He showed no inclination to revolt.
Ayoub’s story allows us to examine such parental worries from a bit closer. Ayoub is a retired officer from the internal security forces. His apartment, just up from the mosque, is in the same street as Saleh’s distribution company. The building dates back to 1970 or ‘71. It consists mostly of studios and 1 and 2 bedroom apartments. Ayoub however had managed to accumulate apartments on his floor and rebuild them into something of a penthouse. He was quite happy where he was – but the experiences of his children perhaps illustrate more precisely the difficulties of entering the housing market. His daughter ‘sits’ at home – she went to university, but it’s difficult to find work, though it’s not as if there’s too much pressure. She basically lives off his pension, which amounts to, if I remembered correctly, $1200. Getting married would the next logical step, according to Ayoub, but that’s quite difficult. It’s even the greatest challenge, nowadays. It’s difficult finding a house or pay for rent, so people simply don’t get married. So that’s why the guys go abroad to work. Sometimes the girl’s parents are rich and they buy a house for her, in which case the guy doesn’t have to. In general it’s expected of the man’s side to provide the material conditions for matrimonial life. It thus occurs frequently that parents invest in their son’s future (usually the son, given scarce resources) by ‘reserving’ housing for them. Ayoub is not of those means however, so his children were on their own. For example, his oldest son had a 110m² apartment in Choueifat, one of the (far) southern suburbs, which he bought in 2003 for $45,000, with a loan of $200/month, a loan that amounts in the end to $25,000 interest paid. That apartment was then worth 150,000$ (at least, his brother considered buying an apartment in the same (“ancient”) building that went for that price – but it needed renovation for another $25,000, which was too much to cough up). If you want to buy an apartment like that in Khandaq then you spend some $350,000. And the bank doesn’t serve you at all anymore. “Special offers”, sure. You take out a $100,000 loan and you wind up paying $200,000 in instalments. Great ‘special’ offer.

Subhi was the head of one of these young families that were struggling to secure a stable spot in the housing market. He lived in ‘the Khatib building’. The Khatib building is a rather famous or infamous building in the area. It is one of three buildings that were developed on the eve of the 1975 war by a number of developers, one of whom, a Syrian, goes by the name Khatib. In contrast to the other buildings in the project, ‘the’ Khatib building was never finished before the war started. During the war it was squatted and residents sort of finished it by themselves, adding balcony walls and one or two floors. The resulting façade is most likely not what Khatib & Co. had had in mind (see pictures above). The refugees were then evicted in 1998 and the apartment entrances were walled up.
However, during the July war of 2006, many inhabitants of the southern suburbs, heavily bombed by Israel, came fleeing to Beirut. They ‘opened’ the closed apartments. While most of them returned relatively soon after, many others moved in, now that the seals of the law had been torn down. Subhi was initially not one of them. After going through a whole list of places that he had lived in since he got married (to a girl from Khandaq), for periods of 1 to 3 years, most of which in the southern suburbs, he explained how he got into the Khatib building. First, a close friend of his wasn’t able to afford to pay the ($200) rent for his Khatib apartment anymore and, together with wife and kids, moved back in with his parents. He had suggested to Subhi that he take over the apartment from him, because Subhi had been on the lookout again around that time. After about half a year in that apartment however, Subhi received word that another resident of the building was ready to move out and that he was willing to sell his apartment – i.e., not the apartment itself, which he didn’t own, but everything that he had done to renovate the place, “with tiles and all” – for the sum of $3,000. That was a big sum for Subhi to pay at once, who was making about $900/month at the time. But he said that he had $2,000 saved up and he borrowed $1,000 from work, for which a certain percentage would be kept out of his monthly pay check. Thus it happened that he got into a decent squat for $3,000. “It was a risk”, as he explains, “because you don’t know when the story might end – the police could come tomorrow and kick you out”. But so far it has paid off. “I’ve been there for a year and a half now, which in rent would have cost me more than that. But I have to be prepared for when I’ll have to leave”. So he’s saving money again. Because these days people expect you to pay upfront for a year, half a year at least. So every month he puts away $300.
His uncertain future, the expectation that someday they will come and kick him out is tied of course to the fact that he lives in an apartment he does not own. “There’s no owner. Nobody knows whose place this is. Maybe it belongs to the owner of the building, maybe it’s the Syrian owner, the one in Syria, maybe the owner is out of the country [msāfir], nobody knows. I paid the guy who had taken it and fixed it up.” But the worry is more general than that. I’ve heard various people express their anxiety about the future of the building. At a certain time there were rumours that the whole plot had been bought and were certainly to be replaced by offices. Subhi was also among those expressing such fears. The rumour-like quality of such speculations is essential, I think. It reflects the disadvantaged position of people like Subhi, which is not merely one of structural insecurity and generalized anxiety, but also one of a lack of access to relevant information. That would account for contrasting bits of information that I found surprising at time, like when I was told by one of the inhabitants of “the Kurdish building” – also developed by Khatib & Co. – that the absent Khatib was not that absent at all, that he was in fact, in contact with him. More substantially, one of the new mukhtars in 2010 opened his office in that building – hardly a sign that the legal status is not in order, or that the building will be torn down.

I have heard many stories like Subhi’s. As mentioned earlier, if you are not already in possession of an apartment – like Abu Rabih, or Ayoub – your hold onto a residence or even a neighbourhood is precarious. Also regular tenants have to prepare for displacement. The reason for this is the rental law, which received a serious overhaul in 1992 in order to address the problems of fixed rents. Over the decades and especially over the course of war, in which inflation was rampant, the rents had come to dramatically lag behind the value of the building and the costs of its maintenance. In 1992, the ‘solution’ was to introduce limited-term rental contracts for all new leases, while leaving the fixed rental contracts untouched (which subsequently became known as ‘old rents’). The term was set for 3 years. At the end of the three years, a new contract has to be signed – and negotiated. In times of rapidly rising prices, as with a real-estate boom, an individual owner would be inclined not to ‘lose out’ relative to the market. That can mean significant price hikes. Thus, one family, who rented a 1 bedroom apartment in somewhat run-down building from the 1970s, paid $300 a month – an amount that at the time of speaking, was already below market level, even in relatively cheap Khandaq. The father thus feared that any price hike ($400, $450) would mean he would have to leave, with his $500/month salary.

Illegality in such cases is a double-edged sword. It may bring relief or
even security relative to the prevailing situation, but (nearly) always a temporally limited one. Consider Abu Kassem’s story. He was born in Aicha Bakkar, a neighbourhood in the centre of West Beirut. He moved once or twice and wound up in Nabaa, the Muslim (Shia) working-class suburb in East Beirut. He found a job however in Khandaq, making (leather) bags. When the war started and he was evicted from Nabaa he moved to Khandaq and squatted an old, white, two-storey building, directly up the street from the Christian neighbourhood (next to Abu Fadi’s art nouveau building, if you’ll recall). The leather business hadn’t survived the war, so he moved to the tire business with a shop in the Christian neighbourhood. In 2001 however, the house he lived in was taken down to make room for a new apartment building. Its developers anticipated an upsurge in the neighbourhood, once the Solidere II project would be implemented. The investors applied for eviction with the Ministry for the Displaced and Abu Kassem reported he received $15,000 in compensation for his departure. In 2004, he also lost the tire business when the whole Christian area was evacuated – without getting any compensation this time. After his eviction, he moved in with his daughter, who lived in another old, somewhat decrepit building, just off the street that is the unofficial domain of the Haidar family. One of the Haidars is Abu Zalem (a war moniker that translates as Father of Darkness), the former Iraqi Baath commander and current Hizbullah rep. I briefly mentioned him above, as the one who was able to find Nawwar housing in an empty building he managed. There are two such buildings on that street. Their owners had already left in 1973, because the municipality had been planning to widen the street and had expropriated the properties along one side. The project never materialized however, most likely because it was part of a package of plans that also would have affected the Bachoura cemetery, which is managed by powerful people in the Sunni community. The plans still exists, on paper, and could therefore be resurrected, but it is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Hypothetically, it could be taken out of the drawer in order to provide infrastructural support to whatever major project will arise in the northern quadrants of the neighbourhood. Abu Zalem however is adamant: forget about it – that project’s not going to happen anymore. The story shows how seeking refuge (almost literally) in the extra-legal order can be the better and sometimes only solution at a given time, just like in the case of Subhi, who has been able to live more cheaply because occupation of apartments is not strictly monitored, but who lives in anxiety about when this might – abruptly – end. Abu Kassem found refuge in the house left behind by other refugees, but then had to leave when others made claim on the property. He now seems relatively
secure in another abandoned building, but when a third party comes to claim *that* property, again he will have no legal grounds to stand on. The generalized insecurity would be a basis for politicization here, an identification of an ‘us’ and ‘them’. That came out for instance in the way Subhi and his friends talked about the Khatib building, a ‘they’ who would come and tear it down and ‘replace it with offices’. But who would be the ‘they’ though? To answer that question we need to go back to the politics of the production of space. The first step is to go into who’s doing the producing, the subsequent step to ask how that factors into people’s sense of the political.

**Small-time entrepreneurs and the production of “middle class” space**

While I have highlighted the worries about ‘where the city is going’ as lived through a few people’s biographies, land prices, rent levels and real-estate development are actually frequently recurring topics of conversation among nearly all Khandaq residents I have come to know. As we’ve seen, the northern section of the neighbourhood is exceptional in Beirut because of its lag in development. In the densely inhabited core of the neighbourhood, there is also a lag vis-à-vis its municipal context, but it takes a different shape. While the architectural fabric of the old Christian neighbourhood, its property politics and structure, and the subsequent large relative disinvestments set up a number of conditions for a radical reorientation of the function and outlook of the area, in the core of Khandaq, the contrast between current and potential value is smaller. It is relatively densely built, which precludes the implementation of large projects, and the rather dilapidated feel (a combination of a poorly maintained old urban fabric and buildings like the Khatib building, hastily and cheaply developed immediately preceding or during the war) also decreases the overall value of the area. The vibrant working-class street life, with its corner boys, will also constitute an impediment (at least for developers of ‘high-end’ properties). As a consequence, projects were more modest in scale (and hence with smaller absolute profit margins) and the rates per m² were closer to those of the far southern suburbs than of the surrounding city.

This does not mean however that there has been no activity. On the contrary, for such a relatively small area, there has been quite a bit of development. Because there have been no empty plots – except for the strip of land along the Green Line – the new developments ‘feed’ on the older built environment, which has lost its profitability vis-à-vis new developments. Buildings from 1960s and earlier have diminished resilience in the face of urban change, because they tend to be smaller (especially for
buildings of up until the 1940s) and because they generally house people on those ‘old rents’. For both reasons, they yield relatively little money. In the case of Khandaq, we can identify three rough stages of this kind of development that displaces older buildings. The relatively unpretentious and bare 6-9 floor apartment towers of the 1980s, built in a time of great demographic pressure on the city; then the slightly higher towers of the first half of the 1990s, with more attention to finishing and more “class”; and finally the second half of the first decade of this century, with edifices yet a floor or two higher, as allowed under the new building law, mostly developed according the currently reigning ‘Gulf’ model for residential towers. For each new tower, a two to five story building, with small street-level businesses and a few families living above, will have had to make way.

My discussion concerns protagonists active in the last building phase, their financial, commercial and design practices and the impact of their work on the neighbourhood ‘ecology’. Let’s start off with the scale of investments. As one developer, who oversees a project in the very middle of the neighbourhood, explained: “This is no place for a super deluxe building. The value of the project simply depends on the area. For our project, for instance, we sell at about $1,600 to $1,700 per m2. Just a street and a block away,” he gestures in the direction of another recent project, on the south-western corner of Khandaq, overlooking the Bachoura cemetery and a small municipal park,

“the developer sold at $2,000 to $2,200. Then, if you go towards the Ministry of Finance [on Bechara al-Khoury street, on the old Green Line], you have this large plot where they’re digging right? $3,500 per m². It’s really close, but it’s because we’re in the middle of the neighbourhood. You’ve seen it. People who would be able to afford a super deluxe building wouldn’t want to live here, and people who would want to live here wouldn’t be able to afford [that kind of class]”. (Interview Moussa’s son, February 2012)

So instead, they built a ‘middle class’ building (see pictures on page 70). That means lower quality of the materials used for finishings, and smaller apartments.

The fact that the developments are relatively modest (instead of ‘super deluxe’ projects) means that a certain kind of developer is attracted to
these opportunities. The projects are initiated and executed by relatively small players, with limited financial resources at their disposal. This favours various kinds of constellations of cooperation in which resources are pooled by several players in order to make a project realizable. A common form this takes is a contract between a landowner, who has land but no money to develop it, and a contractor or developer, who has the experience and network, and sometimes money, to erect a building, but not enough money to buy the land to do it on. In such a case, the two sides pool their respective resources and in the end their transaction is not monetary but material. The contractor develops the land – in exchange for the land, he gives, typically, half the finished building to the landowner, who can then hand over the apartments (usually on each even or uneven floor) to whomever bought it from him. These are somewhat unstable commercial relationships; because of the unpredictably of the real-estate sector and market, sometimes the developer gets into trouble, incur higher costs and then demands a larger share of the building. Although in principle, their contracts are registered and notarized with the court, some horror stories about breakdowns do circulate. (Both the incidents themselves and the stories that circulate about them tell us something about the kinds of protagonists we are dealing with and the somewhat ad-hoc nature of their work.) A variation of this kind of partnership is that vari-

Moussa’s “middle-class building”. On the right, evidence of the accident that caused half of the road to collapse.
ous developers enter into a project as partners, combining their financial resources to buy a piece of property, construct a building, and then dividing the apartments, according to the financial weight each of the partners has put in.

These commercial partnerships do not imply that afterwards the developers are flush with funds. Typically, they do not have enough money to carry out the entire construction and at times they do not even enough to make a serious beginning. Therefore, they need additional financing strategies. One strategy is to go to a bank for a loan. This is not a favourite option, but it does happen. One of the developers I spoke to, Samaha, also sought recourse to the bank. Together with two partners, he had bought the plot Abu Kassem lived on since he was displaced from East Beirut. He had financed himself three earlier buildings he built up in the mountains, but this time, the plot cost them a million dollars and then his money was largely gone. Yet it would take another $2m to complete the construction. So he went to the bank and took out a loan, though now he wished he never did and never will again. The problem with loans, Samaha explained, is that the bank then owns whatever you gave as collateral and so if you’re not fast enough, they can take away your investment. And it didn’t go fast enough, there was quite a bit of delay with the eviction of the refugees living in the old house. When they could finally start, he was therefore in something of a rush to finish the building. Because the refugees in the wider surrounding area also had not been evicted as promised earlier (1999-2000), the value of the building, once finished, was also not what he had expected. But he sold at the going price, and though he notes with some bitterness the enormous flight of prices had since taken (from his own $600 to $2,000/m$^2$ now), he was still glad he sold when he did. If not, it would only have been the bank that would have profited. This story – and its moral – resonates with a widely shared antipathy towards and mistrust of the banking sector.

Instead of financing their projects through loans, developers prefer “co-financing”, by “friends”, as Samaha liked to call them. This is otherwise known as ‘buying off the map’. In this case, customers ‘buy’ the apartment with an initial down payment and usually subsequent instalments. When

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44 As to the banks themselves, they have not had to depend on private sector loans to make money. They make more and more securely lending to the state. Also, given the relatively large degree of non-professional involvement in the real-estate sectors, and given the instability in the region, it is perhaps not entirely unreasonable to set high rents for loans. (Avéline [2000: 26] also mentions that regulation by the Central Bank makes it hard for private banks to invest long-term.)
the building is finished, the customers pays the last instalment and is
danded the property deeds, which up until that point had remained in the
developer’s or landowner’s hands. The customer thus provides the capi-

tal for the construction. There are a few variations in this scheme, mostly
depending on the situation of the developer. In the case of Moussa, the
developer of the ‘middle class’ building, he was out of funds as well, and
went looking for a few customers who – for a discount on the total price –
would be able to both make a substantial initial down payment as well as
continue to pay serious instalments, so that by the time the construction
was finished, the total price for the apartment would also be paid for. The
instalments thus finance each step of the way.\(^{45}\) As to the customer, there
are two reasons, but only one cause, for buying early (rather than waiting
to see the product): steeply rising prices. Over the course of the roughly
two years of construction, the apartment will have become substantially
more expensive. This is a strong incentive for a family wishing to live in
that building or vicinity to buy in early. It is also a wonderful opportunity
for a speculator, whose profit is made up off the difference between the
price ‘off the map’ and the price ‘on delivery’. This investor-buyer has
become an omnipresent phenomenon and all developers I’ve spoken to
have had such customers. The boom – and its promise of short-term profit
– therefore appears to function as the very condition of possibility for the
work of these relatively small players.

Should the funds of a project still run dry, usually the project is just put
on hold. This happened in at least two cases in Khandaq – the contractor
who converted an old office building to apartments for his children (see
the first half of this chapter) and a retired lawyer who was adamant that
no one else get involved in the renovation of the 1954 building his father
had had built, despite his uneven access to funds (see picture on next
page). Such interruptions are also the consequence of not taking out loans
– if no other actors have invested in the project and thus a say over what
happens, then a developer can stall indefinitely. Aveline (2000), in her
descriptions of the real-estate and construction market during the boom
of the early 1990s, which was characterized by ‘a good amount of ama-

\(^{45}\) However, it also happens, though Moussa wanted none of that, that after the down
payment, the (monthly) instalments are relatively low or absent all together. This would be a
typical case of an ‘investor’ (in Moussa’s world, more of a profiteer), who buys the apartment
of the map only to resell directly, once he has the property deeds. Because of the boom and
its rapidly rising prices, this is easy money (and a practice that itself contributes to the boom).
Not all have the kind of pocket money to buy an extra apartment, but, again, depending on
the developer’s own financial largesse, at times they are allowed to pay only the down pay-
ment and a bit. At the end of the construction, they take out a loan from the bank to cover the
remaining sum, sell the apartment, pay back the loan and deposit the rest as profit.
teurism’ (Fawaz: pers. comm), also notes such phenomena, particularly by people venturing into construction more as a side-project. Thus they would have above-market expectations of the price they could ask and stay there and not come down because there was no immediate financial pressure. If they ran out of money during the construction, they might engage in barter with fellow developers.

From my observations, it seems the latest boom has enabled a similar type of ‘amateurism’. At the very least, it appears to be a topic of discussion within the field. Here is an example from an ‘insider’ (a ‘professional’, that is). I sat down with the main supervisor of the luxurious residential tower in the old Christian neighbourhood – an engineer – and the son of one of the owners – son of an engineer, and himself recently graduated in architecture, and they explained what was wrong with so many construction projects “nowadays”. To them the worst case scenario is when someone, typically someone who’s made money abroad and comes back home to invest his money, attracts an engineer to do the design and feasibility studies and then goes and “sits down at the site”, and supervises the construction himself. “Why, just the other day, I saw someone, reading a book “How to Build”!” Then you have owners who do hire and retain the engineer, but – simply because he has the money – forces his ideas on the engineer. “He doesn’t want this wall, doesn’t want that pillar. ‘It’s my money, so I decide’. You know, there’s something called study, there’s
something called *respect*. The main engineer reserved a special resentment for lawyers turned owner-supervisors. Despite clearly not knowing what he’s doing, the lawyer “doesn’t care about whether it’s right – and he gets away with it, because he’s a lawyer and a lawyer moulds [byifab-brik] the law however he wants to, so it’s still 100% legal, he has no problems”.

While there is a good measure of distinction practices in the quotes above – and a general sense of a country wrecked by ‘those’ liars, such as lawyers – the developers I talked to in Khandaq often were indeed people with relatively little experience – if not with construction in general, then at least with running one’s own project. At times this led to mistakes and setbacks that could probably have been avoided otherwise. Take Moussa’s case. He came from a poor family, and starting working young in the printing business. When he had the chance to get a job in Saudi Arabia, he took it. There he worked himself up with various jobs and made good money. But it wasn’t a life, so after 26 years he came back and wanted to invest his fortunes in something. The only business he knows – printing – was not open to him, having been away so long a time. Real-estate was the only other option. The project in Khandaq is his second – his first had been a tough experience though, because his partner had turned out to be a crook, who had embezzled money from powerful people. These powerful people then came after the man and his properties – including the development he and Moussa were collaborating on. Though he managed to finish the project alone, the experience was not encouraging.

This second project came to him through a distant relative, an engineer. He had heard word of a plot in the middle of Khandaq that had been besieged by its own measure of deception and bad judgement. The owners of the plot had wanted to collaborate with a developer, according to the principle of a 50-50 or 60-40 division of the final product. However, when they had gathered the initial down payments, the developer vanished with the money. Afterwards, the family no longer wanted part of any such deal and just wanted to sell the land. Moussa asked no questions and bought it. He quickly ran into trouble himself. The engineer and relative wanted money for his mediation of the plot – a *simsar*’s fee. Itself not a problem, but he wanted the full 2,5% that an official, registered *simsar* gets – “who pays taxes over it”. Moussa refused and wound up

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46 Italics are English in original.
47 A sense explicated by an all-out lament about the state of the nation that directly followed the last comment.
going to court over it (where he won). Before that however, Moussa had already given the engineer the job of doing a feasibility study – because he was family after all. This turned out to be a mistake, because quickly after starting they realized that the study had been done wrong. They had to hire another, very expensive, engineer to advise on, again very expensive, damage control measures. Then, when they were digging the double basement for the car park, they reached below the level of the foundation of the old house that had been there. Was that going to be a problem?, they asked their engineer. The latter counselled them to move on without further precautions. As a result the basement wall collapsed – and half of the adjoining road with it. In these live-and-learn practices, as well as in the assortment of financial strategies, we can discern a certain *bricolage* in these entrepreneurs’ mode of operation.

Finally a few words on their relation to the housing market. How do the developers find their customers and vice versa? The network is among the most important sources of interest for their products. The bank-averse developer was quite explicit about it. “How you can sell your apartments depends on a few things. One is the standard of living you are selling and your contacts to the people [to whom] you present [the offer]. I can’t sell to people who buy for 1,000,000, because I don’t know them. But I know people who can buy for 200,000. So I build for this standard – so I can sell it”. Now that he has completed a few projects he has extended his network as well. He claims that former customers regularly inquire with him if he’s planning anything new, in which case they would want to buy off the map and re-sell upon delivery. In general, to strategically put the word out suffices for it to get around. If the network does not provide enough contacts, then a second option is to go to the real-estate broker, the *simsar*. These are generally not agencies (though these exist as well), but (mostly) local individuals who know their neighbourhood and who are known by its inhabitants. As we’ve seen, there are costs attached to this move, so the developer must feel there are no other, sufficient, options. Samaha for instance, despite his network, also used a few simsars, because he was under pressure by his loan to sell quickly. Only one of my interviewees placed an ad. There is a last strategy, however, which is to do nothing and simply rely on the initiative of the customer. All four developers who built within the core of the neighbourhood I talked to

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48 Levi-Strauss’ opposition between the bricoleur and the “engineer”: the engineer creates specialized tools for specialized purposes. The bricoleur is a “jack-of-all-trades”, who uses few, non-specialized tools for a wide variety of purposes, making and mending things from bits and pieces generally available or from previous jobs.
told me they had found buyers because they stepped up to him, having seen his construction site. The developer of the apartment tower on the corner of the Bachoura cemetery (see pictures on page 76) claimed he found nearly all of his customers in that way. About half of the people who bought from Moussa came up to him after he had started building. A third developer, of the most recent building, hadn’t sold any apartments yet (most likely due to his price, see below) but declared that waiting for people to come to him was basically his business model. The overall picture for these ‘middle-class’ residential towers is that the developers need to gather a starting capital, which they find in their extended networks, and are then able, on the whole, to rely on geographical proximity for the sale of the remaining apartments. 

Probably tied to this laissez-venir policy is the lack of any strong preoccupation about who the customers are – at least in their conversations with me. This is perhaps surprising given the popular politicization of real estate in Beirut. It is possible that the very reliance on network and proximity to the site ensures that economic relations follow in line with previously established social relations (and thus pose fewer occasions for

49 Again, the boom might be a condition of possibility here. Contrast with Samaha’s case, who started building in an earlier period, in 2002, and needed to get a simsar to complete his sales. Since then the urgency has increased for families to get the best deal, or for investors to capitalize on potential profit.

50 This is certainly not a rule. Bou Akar (2012) shows that in the case of a far southern suburb, on the shifting edge between ‘Druze’ and ‘Shia’ spaces, people become more and more preoccupied with demographics as conflict between parties (here, the PSP and Hizbullah) become apparent. By contrast, the automaticity observed in Khandaq points to some sort of a banality of politicization or territorialization – sectarian segregation is by and large reproduced (Sunni and Shia plots stay Sunni or Shia), as a naturalized political fact on the ground.
reflexion). Generally at least, the attitude seems to be ‘come what may’. When developers did set standards for their customers, they were class related. Najjar, the retired lawyer who renovated his father’s building, was adamant that only respectable people enter his building. This is partly premised on the fact that he *lets* his apartments and does not intend on selling them. His relation to the customer therefore transcends the sales contract. Najjar was quite bitter about what the refugees had ‘done to his building’ and did not want a repeat experience. He therefore discarded the possibility of letting to someone from the neighbourhood. Most likely he makes an equation between lower class, refugees, unrespectable and Shia (a common associative chain in Lebanon). Bazzi, the developer of the most recent building I queried, also had standards, but his were directly related to the high price he was asking ($350,000, certainly not high for Beirut standards, but above the Khandaq level, which was still some $100,000 lower). Samaha also might have imagined different customers, ‘gentrifiers’ if you will, attracted to Solidified prospects for the neighbourhood. But like Bazzi that was on the basis of an economic calculation (upturn of the neighbourhood), not a social (sectarian) one (this might actually account for the fact that the building is now one of the most confessionally diverse buildings in the neighbourhood – as an outsider with a deadline, Samaha attracted whomever he could, including other outsiders)\(^5\). The developer of the tower overlooking the Bachoura cemetery might be most representative for the general attitude. He explicitly professed not to do any serious checks. As far he was concerned, he cannot be held responsible for what people do in the building once he has handed over the papers. However he did see a certain auto-selection by the customers themselves. Because in fact all the people who live there now already knew each other before. Not that they knew from the beginning who were the other clients, but when they started inquiring about the building, they also asked about their potential neighbours, finding out that of course they knew who such and such was, and that they were good people (in the frictionless picture he painted).

In light of the terms of this chapter, one thing of this overview should immediately catch one’s attention: the lack of intervention by political parties in these real-estate transactions, either by backing certain actors or by participating as actor themselves in order to secure a political and thus sectarian hegemony. Also the developers themselves profess no preoccu-

\(^5\) This might also be an indication of a future trend, tied to an historical shift away from private owners with personal ties to building and neighbourhood, like Najjar, to entrepreneurs and companies who build to sell and move on, like Samaha.
pation with such political or sectarian questions. The dimension of the territorial logic according to which political parties seek to constitute and protect the demographics of a given area is therefore absent here. What does this imply for people’s political imagination? The same dimension of territorialization was also relinquished in the case of the Christian neighbourhood, but still people tended to see the area as part of sectarian competition. Moreover, the rising prices that the work of these developers in the heart of the neighbourhood symbolizes and actively contributes to are the source of much anxious talk in the neighbourhood. Such anxiety should provide fertile ground for politicization of their work. In fact, there is a whole body of literature on urban politics that takes that very anxiety as its very premise. Politics in the city would arise out the tension between the search for profit over space and the existential needs of those dwelling in that space. It may be fruitful to take a detour through this body of literature to clarify our present questions, i.e., what matters people politicize in Beirut and within the frame of which political imagination.

**Capitalism and the political in Beirut** Marxist theorization has dominated urban studies (in geography more so than in sociology) ever since David Harvey’s (1973) exploration in *Social Justice and the City* of the shortcoming of traditional – ‘liberal’ – geography and his search for their resolution in the neo-Marxist political economy that came out of France (primarily in the writings of Henri Lefebvre and Manuel Castells). While applications and research directions are varied, in the foreground or in the background, there has always been a preoccupation with the ‘capitalist city’. The key to these efforts lies in the return to the very fundamental principle of Marxist political economy, which as Soja (2000: 95) reminds us, “revolved around the inbuilt social necessity within capitalism to produce and reproduce poverty and inequality”. Harvey and those that followed in his footsteps have analysed how the built environment enables and conditions the reproduction of capitalism (that is, the conditions of accumulation, consumption and renewed investment) and how the enlistment of the built environment in the capitalist project reproduces the inequality inherent to capitalism on a spatial scale. In order to indicate how this argument works, I first revisit one of the fundamental master categories that capture the logic of the neo-Marxist explanatory mode, the production of space, after which I move on to the kind of politics thought to follow from such production of space.\(^{52}\) We should then be able to

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\(^{52}\) In this literature review I single out Harvey and Logan & Molotch. Of course this does
frame more clearly what politics we should expect in Khandaq.

**The politics of accumulation and consumption** Capital makes and remakes the city into its image. The – only slightly tongue-in-cheek – deification of capital implicit in Harvey’s early slogan is paradigmatic for his theoretical framework. His aim is primarily to spell out the logic of urbanization in the age of capitalist accumulation, secondarily to point out the plausibility of the mechanisms he identifies by marshalling various data sets of (regional) economic performance, and only finally to get into the nitty-gritty of actual case studies (and when he does get into it, he does it with so much for relish for the nitty-gritty that Savage & Warde [1993: 48] argue he loses sight of the theoretical framework). That means that his primary units of analysis are such like ‘production’, ‘consumption’ or the ‘circulation of capital when viewed in aggregate’ (all mentioned in Harvey 1989: 21). Thus, in some of his pieces, talk is more about the capitalist city in general than about any city in particular, as exemplified in the following quote: “Production is typically separated from consumption under capitalism by market exchange. This has enormous implications for urbanization and urban structure. Work spaces and times separate out from consumption spaces and times in ways unknown in an artisan or peasant culture” (id.). We will see there is some loss in translation going from the city in general to a city in particular.

I will discuss two – interlinked – examples of Harvey’s kind of arguments about how the city changes. Among his more famous theoretical statements is the ‘switch’ between circuits of capital circulation. The first circuit is that of productive capital. The second is the built environment – infrastructure and housing. The third is science, technology and education. He incorporates this classification of the workings of capitalist economies into the older Marxist postulate of the inherent instability of capitalism, one specific elaboration of which is the theory of over-accumulation. Over-accumulation occurs because capitalists (roughly, those with money to spare, cf. Harvey 1989: 9) need to continually reinvest their surplus capital (commonly known as profit) in order to survive the competition from fellow capitalists. This increases the availability of goods on the market and also generally tends to reduce the amount of labour power needed to produce those goods, because of technological innovations that not do justice to the diversity of the field. However, arguably each is foundational to, and thus exemplary for, a certain paradigm within the Marxist field – Harvey for his definite focus on the structural side of urban production, and Logan & Molotch for bringing in situated agency into the conceptual framework.
make the capitalist enterprise more competitive. In other words, capitalist reinvestment also tends to create labour surpluses (i.e., unemployment). You then have a situation where goods can no longer be ‘absorbed’ (i.e., bought by people will little purchasing power) and the re-investments cannot be realized. In this situation, capitalist seek to ‘fix’ their problem of useless and thus threatening surplus capital by finding other targets of investment. This is where the circuits come in. So far money (capital) has been circulating within the first, productive circuit. When that circuit has become exhausted as above, capitalists move on to the second one. Harvey tries to make this plausible by showing the correlation between economic crises and surges in construction. The American suburbs, for example, would have been built in such attempts to absorb falling rates of profit. This is one of the ways Harvey wants to show us how urban development is narrowly tied to economic processes, specifically to the cyclically changing interests of ‘capital’. (Harvey 1989: 60ff.)

While this (simplified summary) may point to circumstances when capital is freed up for the development of urban space, it doesn’t yet specify how or where such development takes place. While, as mentioned, Harvey’s strong suit isn’t the case study, he does lay out a basic framework of the interests that guide urban development. I’ll take two examples. One way is to trace how residential segregation goes back to people’s differential relation to capital. Residential segregation is, as “observed but not explained” by the geographic literature, at bottom that “similar people like to, or just do, live close to each other” [id: 109]. Rephrased in more sophisticated terms, residential patterns follow social structure. Social structure, in turn, follows out of relations to capital, as the doxa holds. Following Giddens, Harvey identifies five ‘forces’ that derive from “the dynamics of capitalist society” and which structure social differentiation, such as labour specialization, consumption and life-style, or class consciousness. Working-class (esp. immigrant) neighbourhoods for example once came into being in necessary solidarity to survive hard economic times and have since then continued to reproduce working-class values and labour qualities. Suburbs for the better-to-do are created, as explained above, “to [sustain] an effective demand for products”, but they are successful as geographical entities in part by the rise of a middle-class “imbued with the ideology of competitive and possessive individualism” and the financial means to “acquire market capacity” (id: 120ff.). In other words, the concentration of such population groups and the reification of their social and cultural features through the so-called ‘neighbourhood effect’, then help to reproduce the diverse labour qualities required for capitalist society. Capital and people’s relation to it then not only drives
when development of the city occurs, but also where and how. A second mechanism that Harvey discusses is tied to his conception of urban politics. Urban politics comes forth out of two dynamics or ‘contradictions’: ‘internal’ competition over the city – between capital and labour – on the one hand, and external competition between cities, on the other. Naturally these two dynamics have an impact on each other. The compromises between capital and labour interests affect the locational competitive position of a city. The investments (in the production of goods or delivery of services) to enhance that position have an impact on relations between capital and labour, by creating redundancies or setting new functional requirements for workers. So in between these two contradictions, what happens to the urban social and physical fabric? The internal contradiction is directly a politics of class, in the sense that it is a push-and-pull struggle between two groups who relate differently to the city defined as interrelated labour and commodity markets. The stakes of such struggles can be wages, working conditions, or consumption of private as well as public goods, like education. (id: 142) In turn, such struggles have an effect on where people live, work and consume – i.e., where they have access to which labour and consumption markets. The external contradiction results in what Molotch (1973) has termed ‘growth coalitions’. These are varying alliances of members of the local “ruling class” that seek to “boost” their location by seeking access to the state, which they need to lay the ground for the innovation of the local economic sector. Since the local capitalists cannot in fact bear the risks of such new investments themselves, they “collectivize [these] risks through finance capital and the state”. With such innovation, the whole city changes, as it spills over into “consumption, household reproduction, social services (e.g. education, health care), administration, cultural activities, and political processes”. The city can only survive geographical competition in perpetually finding the “appropriate mix of life-styles, social provision, cultural forms, and politics and administration”. (Harvey 1989: 156-8)

We have come a long way from Beirut. In order gauge the relevance of this sociology built out of the experience of industrializing and then deindustrializing US and Britain, a short summary of the logic of the argument is in order. First we have to stress the following bottom line: “Harvey’s analysis [...] conceptualized the significance of investment in the built environment in relation to other economic processes, suggesting links between urban restructuring and economic restructuring” (Savage & Warde 1993: 48). The premise that the economy is central to the organization of the city – and thus also that urban politics is ultimately an economic politics – will be important for our exploration of how the para-
digm plays out in Khandaq. Second, Harvey’s actors are concrete abstract condensations of real-world people and institutions: (finance) capital, labour, sometimes he speaks of the property owner or rentier, and finally the state. The ‘actions’ of these actors are all animated by the internal contradictions of the capitalist system, such as the laws of competition, the resulting inevitable crises in the accumulation process, or the opposition of class interests. Actors coalesce and break up in strategies and struggles to defend or improve their place, as individuals or as groups, in the accumulation ‘machine’. The politics that result is thus based on the politicization of accumulation and consumption – that is, based on the question what leeway capitalists get to (re-) organize the production process in the interest of profit and what investments are made into the ‘reproduction’ of the labourer, in terms of wages and collective amenities. Third, then, the city parcels out these different groups, reifying these groups and their oppositions in times of stability, further disrupting them in times of transformation (of crisis or innovation). In the following, I will go into the equally influential work of Logan & Molotch, who pick up on Harvey’s work but apply it in a more case-sensitive manner, if you will. They still do retain the fundamentals of the framework, as outlined. As we slowly head back to Beirut, two of these fundamentals will prove problematic: the focus on economics (accumulation and consumption) as the locus of politicization, and the opposition of two clusters of actors within that politicization.

Residents, entrepreneurs and the politics of space in Khandaq The conceptualization Logan & Molotch (1987) formulate of urban politics follows Harvey’s closely but is considerably tuned and refined. It follows out of their basic reaction to the idea of the production of space, which goes a little bit as following: ‘the market is indeed important, paramount even, but someone like Harvey (bless him) never really explained how this urban growth for capital accumulation actually works’. Their solution is introduce ‘the human factor’. The capitalist interests are certainly there, but they narrow them down to rent interests – that is, the value of land and the built environment. That value is only profitable if the area in question is an attractive one – attractive for consumption, attractive for construction, or attractive for industry. Logan & Molotch’ first innovation is therefore to centre the production of space around the question of how capitalists can boost the exchange value of the city. One problem such capitalists immediately run into is that the same land and built environment also have a use value for its current owners and occupants. Typically, the latter are not interested in the rise of the exchange value of the land they live on, because it may mean they no longer have a place there. The
city and its transformation is thus the result out of the conflict between two – in their analysis more or less diametrically opposed – interests in land: the interest in either its exchange value or its use value. That conflict makes up urban politics, which they define as the politics of the “social organization of property and space” (1987: 38).

The ‘capitalists’ and the ‘users’ above are specified respectively as ‘entrepreneurs’, who band together into a ‘growth coalition’\(^{53}\), and as ‘residents’, who seek strength in numbers in the ‘community’. Logan & Molotch use the term “entrepreneurs” (or “place entrepreneurs”) for “the people directly involved in the exchange of places and collection of rents, have the job of trapping human activity at the sites of their pecuniary interests”, and a “special group among the privileged: modern urban rentiers, somewhat analogous to their feudal landholding predecessors” (1987: 29). They identify three contemporary types: serendipitous entrepreneurs, active entrepreneurs, and structural speculators. The first type represents someone who may have inherited land, or owns land that he worked until he realized it would yield much greater value for other uses. He is essentially passive, like the classic rentier. The second strives for rent by buying into places of future profit, mostly by following emergent developments. The last type seeks to influence or create such emergent development through intervention, by zoning or attracting business or construction. The rent they seek is often monopolistic or ‘redistributive’ (i.e., through the appropriation of pre-existing values, usually through state action – this is where Harvey got his ideas about elites in inter-urban competition from).

Clearly, the most likely analytical candidates for the people involved in the production of space in the heart of Khandaq would be the serendipitous and the active entrepreneurs. The serendipitous entrepreneurs would be the landowners who decide to make a buck out of their property instead of putting it to gainful or functional use, whereas the active entrepreneurs would be the small-time developers on the lookout for an opportunity to make a buck themselves (though in Logan & Molotch active entrepreneurs are identified only as investors, not as developers). Yet, the categories don’t quite fit. Logan & Molotch reserve a – disproportionate – share of their discussion of entrepreneurs for the structural speculators, even tending to conflate the two. Likely, this is an inheritance

\(^{53}\) They borrow this phrase from Molotch’ earlier use and further develop it in the broader framework outlined directly below. Such growth coalitions are made up primarily by ‘who stand most to gain by decisions about land-use’, that is the land owners and entrepreneurs, but to promote their interests they also attempt to enlist city councillors (elected with the former’s support), media and (semi-) public utilities organizations.
of the Harveyan neo-Marxist analytical apparatus, in particular the opposition between ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ which is transposed here onto ‘entrepreneurs’ and ‘residents’. That opposition subsequently runs in intuitive parallel to an opposition between the locus of agency and dormant agency, respectively. As a consequence, Logan & Molotch are so focused on either powerful actors who shape the city according to their own design, or on the ordinary folks who react to these designs that they seemingly fail to note what is actually going on in the middle between these two opposites.

In that ‘middle’, firstly, we can observe that even while the small-time developers are individually insignificant (perhaps easily relegated to a secondary category of analysis), collectively they have a significant impact on the neighbourhood ‘ecology’: they have serious consequences for its demographic composition (class, confession) and the related territorial identity of the area (as their customers come from neighbourhood networks – in the cases I’ve examined, both Sunni and Shia). Moreover their work drives up prices and raises the value of the neighbourhood, setting up new developments opportunities in the future, while making it more difficult for many residents to hold onto their homes. Secondly, a focus on the opposition between the two poles hides from view the collusion that occurs between residents and entrepreneurs. Not only collusion in the sense that landowners become (serendipitous) entrepreneurs, but also in the sense that other residents are interested in investment opportunities – to buy off the map and resell on delivery (although some also make longer-term investments, especially with expat money).

What kind of consequences would that have, thirdly, for urban politics here? Politicization of the work of these developers appears to be absent. On the one hand, the entrepreneurs themselves are not organized into any kind of collective that furthers their interests. They are obviously networked, they will exchange services and at times collaborate, but nothing further than that. There is no ‘growth coalition’ that is actively involved in the politics of space and place. From the residents’ point of view, on the other hand, there is subsequently also no collective to oppose. But it’s not just that. A comparison with attitudes about the activities in the old Christian neighbourhood should bring that out. Whereas these are commonly seen with misgivings, whether those be of sectarian nature (‘they’ are trying to get us out of here) or of class (‘they’ don’t build apartments anymore), the only time I heard someone speak out against one of the local developers, was when, during a conversation between neighbours about house hunts, someone called him ‘stupid’ (hmar, donkey), not to be taken seriously, for asking such high prices. There is a certain intimacy
here. Their ‘smallness’ may be one of the reasons why exchange values of Khandaq’s small-time developers are not politicized: being ‘of’ the people, they are not considered representatives of ‘big interests’, as an ‘other’ to mistrust or resist. People also simply (sufficiently) know them and how they operate, and therefore do not have to resort to speculation (with its concomitant conspirative dimensions). In other words, in addition to the fact that some residents have stake in the exchange values (as home buyers or ‘ordinary’ investors), both the ‘amateur’ reality of the developers that were locally active, as well as the way that residents subsequently perceived them, blurred the potential boundary between them and made a political consciousness and struggle that arises out of the conflict of interests between exchange and use values unlikely.

So what does this say about Harvey’s and Logan & Molotch’ conception of urban politics? Their conception is based on two key assumptions. One is that the city is made by big interests. These interests are concentrated in the growth coalitions who are locked into struggles with competing elites in different cities as well as with ‘labour’ or ‘residents’ over access to and control over space in the same city. This assumption falls flat, by and large, as we’ve seen, in Khandaq. Now, certainly Beirut does have its own ‘big interests’, its elite ‘growth alliances’, who have appealed to and infiltrated the state on the more powerful translocal levels (as Harvey predicts they would [1989: 153]). Big-time developers successfully lobbied for the legislation of favourable conditions for real estate development, and were able to place representatives in the Higher Council for Urbanism, a very useful regulatory organ that in practice supersedes the municipality’s power in ratifying large developments (cf. Krijnen & Fawaz 2010: 124). Through that kind of ‘redistributive’ advocacy they have also created new conditions for work in Khandaq, where developers use the same kind of rules to increase the maximally allowed square feet of built surface. But in all other senses, in
Khandaq one can’t really speak of ‘big interests’. In other words, yes the city is made by big interests, but unevenly so. In Beirut and so many (postcolonial) cities like it, there is a whole world of small-time but large-scale development for which the neo-Marxist framework might not be terribly useful. What about the old Christian neighbourhood then? These high-value speculations do line up more closely with the neo-Marxist framework. Yet, as we’ve seen, Khandaq residents have not developed any real politics over that either. That disjuncture has to do with the second assumption that ‘it’s the economy, stupid’. By contrast, this case suggests that politics in the city is not always or exclusively an “urban politics”, which (as in Harvey’s definition) follows out of the contradictions of capitalism, or (as in Logan & Molotch’ understanding) is about “the social organization of property and space”. One problem in such an approach is that exclusion of other vectors of politicization blurs our understanding of how the struggle over rent interests is played out. Instead, one may wonder what a politics over identity, ethnicity, or state power might do to these struggles. To take the example of the Christian neighbourhood, that area was opened up for renewed investment through a complex negotiation between two political blocs – Hizbullah and Amal on the one hand, Hariri’s Future Movement on the other – that involved compromises about ‘state sovereignty’, and was set in a period in which when things looked quite unstable there with the 2008 economic crash. Lebanon seemed unaffected, so part of the surplus that couldn’t be reinvested in the Gulf sector got reinvested into real-estate elsewhere. Again, at least from a bird’s eye perspective, that fits generally with Harvey’s thesis. On the other hand, though, you have expat money, which obeys different logics, since it is not part of a switch between loci of investments and is relatively independent from economic cycles. Yet it is one of the main drivers of the real-estate sector in Lebanon.

56 In a sense, that area lines up with neo-Marxist theorisation about gentrification, in particular in Neil Smith’s (1996) work. Smith hypothesized that gentrification occurred when disinvestment in a certain area had reach a certain low point, such that reinvestment would become profitable relative to other better-to-do areas. In one way, this is what happened in the old Christian neighbourhood, which first languished when other areas received new investments, then became subject to speculation in anticipation of a quick uptake of the area, and subsequently new development project started to change the ‘ecology’ of the area (after my fieldwork period, a large ‘cultural’ project was realized there, in addition to the more luxurious residential projects already mentioned in this chapter). In another way, however, it doesn’t correspond to this model, since – and this echoes the critique of Harvey and Logan & Molotch in the ensuing paragraph - the ‘cycles’ of disinvestment and renewed investment didn’t follow the laws of the market, but were created by war, displacement and post-war reconstruction politics. As to the heart of the neighbourhood, one could argue that gentrification is happening there as well – rising prices, displacement – but in contrast to this gentrification model, that socio-economic change is not accompanied by changes in lifestyle and “revanchist” claims to control over the neighbourhood. The social life of (re)development looks different from the UK-US.

57 Walid Jumblatt veered between the two (in his capacity of leader of the Druze, who are both key stakeholders in negotiations over refugees and reparation, and a key ‘swinging voting bloc’ in ever-shifting alliances).
a ‘return to normality’ was paradigmatic for public reflections about the fate of the displaced. These are not political conflicts of the capitalist kind, but obviously have a significant impact on the capitalist production of space (say, where and when residential or commercial real estate is realized). (Something very similar holds for the heart of Khandaq, obviously. Contradiction between labour and capital does not produce politics by itself, or to put it in Logan & Molotch’ terms, property is not the competitive stake per se between space producers and consumers. Inter-urban competition is even entirely irrelevant here.) That is one point. The other concerns a question what an ‘urban’ politics about identity, ethnicity and state power looks like, or – to come at it from the opposition direction – what identity, ethnicity and notions of state power do for people’s sense of the political independently of what it does for economic conflicts of interest. I start exploring that question in the following section.

**Conclusion** The way that people talk about (imminent, imagined) developments in the Christian neighbourhood shows that the territorial consciousness that various scholars imputed to the Lebanese is clearly present among Khandaq residents. However, the fact that developments in the heart of the neighbourhood are not discussed in territorial terms invites qualification of that presence. What is shared in both cases is a generalized insecurity. Most people worry about, or fear in some way for their place in the neighbourhood and the city, whether it be their own or their children’s. That insecurity is the basis for how people talk about the city. What is different is the kind of uncertainty in each case. People’s ‘territorial’ reflections about the fate of the Christian neighbourhood are at heart speculative reflections. They know something is up, but don’t know what precisely. Perhaps much in line with how conspiracy theories work, the only (or at least semiotically tempting) recourse is to turn to impute the workings of powerful (and inimical) forces. In the heart of the neighbourhood, uncertainty makes way for familiarity, though not conviviality. Actors are reduced to human size, even while they are derided or even resented (as in the “donkey’s” case). Likely, then, the perceived banality of these actors prevents people from developing ‘residence’ as the basis of a moral community, like Logan & Molotch’ ‘community of residents’, and from taking up ‘resident’ as the basis for a political stance, as in a ‘rights to the city’ type of movement. Meanwhile, the amateuristic nature of the small-time entrepreneurs prevents them from banding together in a ‘community of capitalists’ – i.e., a growth coalition. Both prevent a politics of place from emerging.

Two remarks are in order. Firstly, while people do not currently situate
the political in the territory, it is a latent possibility. Given other circumstances, one can imagine they might start to. Thus, the fact that the parties have given up the old Christian neighbourhood as a ‘territory’ rather acts as a disincentive to identify with it and see it as part of a struggle between factions (and it may also explain, more than state authority which carries no weight in other examples we’ve seen, why no-one from the neighbourhood squats the empty buildings in that part of Khandaq, despite urgent pressure on the housing market). Should that change (more in line with, for example, Bou Akar’s 2012 case; cf. fn. 50), ‘territoriality’ may well become more central to people’s conception of their place and role in the political community. Secondly, even though insecurity does not translate into a ‘residential’ politics, it is transposed into the style of political imagination Khandaq residents actually do develop. That style does not proclaim rights to the city, but does insist on the dignity of the people.