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

Boekelo, M.

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Chapter 5:
Towards citizenship: reforming state and society

‘Yes to Dialogue’ (Na-am lil Hiwar) was an initiative by the NGO Towards Citizenship (Nahwa al-Muwatiniya) and consisted of bi-weekly discussion evenings about current and perennial topics preoccupying Lebanon and the challenges it faces. One evening in December 2009, the organizers held a meta-session about the question: “Civil Society and Power (sulta): Who Chooses Whom”? The occasion for the topic was the appointment of two previously important ‘members of civil society’ to high positions in government. Ziad Baroud, a lawyer who had been closely tied to the national campaign for electoral reforms, had become the head of the Ministry of Interior, whereas Ghassan Moukheiber, a lawyer and “activist” (his own words) who often supported initiatives by NGOs for reform, had been re-elected to his post in Parliament. These successes begged the question for the organizers and others of how to understand the relations between civil society and state and government. Should those now be re-evaluated? The question implies a self-understanding of people ‘in’ civil society, according to which civil society is otherwise deprived of access to power. Now that they had ‘their’ men in government, though, what could they expect?

One person in particular spoke to the imagination: Ziad Baroud. He had been closely associated with LADE – the Lebanese Association for Democratic Reform – which had spearheaded the movement to hold local elections for the first time since 1972. When this push succeeded in 1998 (in spite of proposals by some political leaders to postpone them yet again) it was widely perceived in civil society as a great success and an example of the potential power of collective organization. Baroud still reflected the glow of that success and his image was therefore intimately entwined with the progressive promises of civil society. Hopes were

accordingly high when he was appointed Minister of Interior. The statement by a member of the association Save Beirut Heritage, an initiative I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, might illustrate this.

I tend to think that the Interior Minister, and the Minister of Culture are playing a major role because they are aware. The Interior Minister – I’m not saying I think everything he does is perfect, but he has played a major role in facilitating the work of young associations, new NGOs. It’s a lot easier now than 4 years ago, to create an NGO. I mean legally. Because it’s the policy of the actual Minister. […] They make things easier, they are encouraging youth initiatives. (Interview July 2010)

His persona correspondingly dominated the discussion at the Yes to Dialogue session (“hmm, every time we come back to Ziad Baroud” one of the speakers mused, when looking for an example to illustrate a point). Questions by the audience pertained to his role – can he still act as a member of civil society, now that he is a minister? And can he (and others like him) represent its interests at the heart of the state? Other questions were of a more general nature – does this mean that civil society ideology (is there and should there be such a thing?) now ‘has power’? The invited speakers, veteran members of civil society (Karam Karam, Gilbert Doumit, Adib Nehme), all defused such expectations somewhat. They emphasized that Baroud cannot but act as minister now, that is, as a representative of state, even if perhaps he can facilitate contact between activists and the policy making process; that civil society should not be “represented” in the state, but that its task is to demand that the state represent all of Lebanon; and that civil society has no ideology (like you would have if you were from the left, secular, or part of the opposition); it merely has to stay autonomous.

The assumptions that seemed to undergird questions of the audience and the contributions of the speakers became clearer to me as some of those audience members later explained to me that it was a running joke that Ziad Baroud was considered the za’im of Lebanon’s ‘19th sect’: civil society. That would explain, even if facetiously, a notion that ‘civil society’s interests’ should be represented in government by ‘its’ ministers, “just like other” sects. We thus see a perhaps curious Lebanese spin on what are arguably concerns that have preoccupied both normative theorists of civil society (revolving around a notion of a ‘society’ against a ‘state’) as well as those 1980s activists (paradigmatically, in communist Europe and authoritarian Latin-America) who first put the term on the agenda. (Cf. Walzer 2003: 306; Edwards & Foley 1998: 127) ‘Civil society’ is some kind
of space apart from the rest of society; and whereas civil society is the harbour for progressive forces in Lebanon, it is embattled by a stronger, conservative political apparatus.

To be clear, ‘civil society’ is an emic concept here. It is a label, deployed and self-ascribed by a large variety of organizations and – mostly highly-educated – individuals. As such it is an ideal that people strive to emulate (as individuals) or to realize (as a form of social and political organization), depending on which perspective they speak from. Accordingly, I shall use the term to gloss the ensemble of practices that aim at realizing that ideal. Such practices occur as much across public events as in the more ‘private’ (or at least back-stage) daily office settings of (non-governmental) organizations. I focus largely on the former in this chapter and more on the latter in Chapter 6. The import of public events derives from the fact that public spaces are paradigmatic and constitutive of the ideal of civil society itself, so we need to attend to them to understand what people think they are up to. What happens outside these public spaces – the material for Chapter 6 – complicates that self-understanding, and subsequently scholarly ideas about citizenship that are based on such self-understandings. Chapter 6 also discusses how the worlds of Khandaq and of civil society relate to each other, as well as how we should understand their disparities and convergences. This fifth chapter focuses on ‘civil society’ first, though.

Scope and purpose of the chapter
Before going into the main body of the chapter, I need to provide two qualifications about what this chapter pertains to and what it sets out to accomplish. Firstly, in line with this chapter’s focus of bringing out civil society’s self-understanding, the material of this chapter is largely discursive. However, most of that material is situated (‘public’) speech, not discourse in written form. That makes this chapter primarily – if not exclusively – an exercise in something akin to what Hymes (1962) called an ethnography of speaking; in other words, it focuses on practices of speaking about politics, about social engagement and the state. Attention to other kinds of practices (e.g. of accomplishing one’s stated goals), as well as some of the hopes and desires that go into them, follows in the next chapter.

A second qualification concerns the delimitation of ‘civil society’. The field of civil society proper is already quite variegated, but that field is also enmeshed in a social scene and cultural field that cannot be reduced to it. Let me explain in order. First the field itself. It is made up by a generic type of advocacy work, such as coaxing the state to integrate youth as a concern into more policy domains; by NGO-based social work, such as
projects that promote the (psychological) well-being of children or women’s integration into the economy; as well as by more activist activities – there are loose networks of like-minded activists, which may be activated and mobilized for topical protests, as well as small advocacy groups that are tied to a specific domain (like the environment, or heritage) and which attempt to sway public opinion and pressure politicians. While there are important similarities in ideology and the convergences in practices, what ‘civil society’ looks like and means to people will vary across these domains. It is therefore important to point out that the material here draws from the last category, and more particularly, those initiatives that want to reform Lebanese society by creating new public spaces and a new public culture.

The large social and cultural universe in which civil society is embedded pertains to the second question of delimitation. Civil society shares spaces and people with a young (and not so young), ‘forward’-looking professional class and (student) intelligentsia. The same people meet each other at, say, demonstrations for civil marriage; at a festival of the arts on the long (‘patrimonial’) stairs of the gentrified Gemmayze neighbourhood; at a documentary screening about the war of the Palestinian camps (1985-‘89) at an NGO that deals with the legacy of the (civil) war; in the ‘intellectuals’ café’ T-Marbouta (library included) or other favourites of the Hamra neighbourhood; they may meet again in ‘Zico’s House’, for a performance by one its foreign, resident artists or a meeting by one of the NGOs housed there. Then there are a myriad of incidental events, whether to promote an issue or to showcase – often socially relevant – artwork. Despite their differences, these events almost always explicitly or indirectly address larger questions of what defines Lebanon, what ails it, or what it could be. A loosely delineated group of people thus share political and ‘aesthetic’ concerns, through a certain consistency and coherence of ways of expressing them across these various spaces. The chapter cannot do justice to these interlinkages and cross-pollinations, but it is useful to keep in mind as it feeds into the particular moral and social universe that is ‘civil society’.

‘Civil society’ and the confessional system Though most of the people active in the field of ‘civil society’ might well be naturally inclined to use, and think of themselves through, the Anglophone term, there are actually two translations of the term in Arabic. One – \textit{al-mujtama` al-madani} – is more current than the second – \textit{al-mujtama` al-ahli} – but they are both employed (in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world) and, to a certain extent, interchangeably. However, some civil society activists
Omar Traboulsi: It is quite revealing that in the Arabic language, we have two terms to describe civil society, namely al-mujtama al-ahli and al-mujtama al-madani. The first term ahli, implies “kinship”. It is also a broad term as it might also imply tribal rather than class or social movements which are more enshrined in the term al-mujtama al-madani. Al-mujtama al-madani carries a willingness to move away from traditional structures and perceptions. Civil society in Lebanon is more of an ahli rather than of a madani nature. Notwithstanding, both can function either against or in favor of the ruling party. There are also instances when they are in rivalry.

During and after the civil war of Lebanon, new trends have appeared. Environmental, human rights, women and certain secular organizations were formed that are more of a madani nature. Despite their importance, they still do not represent the dominant model.127

I suspect Traboulsi deems it “revealing” in the sense that only because the two sectors or social dynamics are so innately and significantly different, ‘the Arabic language’ could (had to) come up with two terms for something that for others is but one thing (the Eskimo snow phenomenon). While Traboulsi represents a somewhat nuanced stance on what separates the two (‘ahli’ can also align with progressive forces, even if incidentally), the general tendency for all who make a distinction is to associate mujtama` madani to a modern and progressive form of associational life, and mujtama` ahli to the conservative or even reactionary powers in the country. The etymology of the two terms easily play into this conception – madani comes from the root verb meaning to civilize or urbanize. Ahli, as Traboulsi explained, is at root a kinship term: ahl means family, kin or parents.

The distinction has various lives. In the 1990s, it became politically charged. In an interview, one of the founders of the gay advocacy group Helem, Jad, explained he disapproved of the distinction. Originally, he says, the distinction was coined to make a distinction between ‘secular’ organizations and ‘religious’ ones, i.e. those tied to established powers of the sectarian political system. But then it turned into a way of ostraciz-
ing the latter kind of organizations, especially by the international donor community (when the NGO and donor were of different political persuasions). For example, USAID doesn’t want to fund people working with Hizbullah and in order to justify such policies, they can base themselves on that distinction: ‘they aren’t mujtama’ madani, so we can’t fund them’. (Helem works with health providers tied to Hizbullah to deliver an education program to known cruising areas.) The people who invented the distinction, in other words, are simply “elitist”. He identified them as part of the “new liberal movement” that sought to bring on a “revival” of Lebanese culture and society, a mirror to the Nahda (“Renaissance”) in 19th century Beirut and Cairo. Jad saw it as a classist and racist enterprise, premised as it was on ‘battling backwardness”128. He concluded rather gleefully though that the movement was over and its protagonists had become practically inconsequential since. (Interview May 2009)

While the old controversies may be over, the terminology survives. As Jad indicated, it can still be a powerful tool to make or break NGOs (e.g. to get or bar them from funding). Moreover, those discussions seem to reverberate in a next generation of civil society activists as well. Nayla, one of the directors of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections, mentioned above, described the differences to me thus:

There’s a lot of difference between them; I think that the mujtama` al-ahli is more powerful than the mujtama` al-madani in Lebanon, and I think that, the more mujtama` madani is getting enforced [strengthened], [the more] mujtama` ahli could be weaker, because when we speak of mujtama` ahli, we speak of families, about confessions, that have a great impact on the voters, on citizens, on a lot of our life in Lebanon. So I think when the political parties are enforced, when civil society is enforced and the state itself is enforced, automatically, when the individual itself is considered more important than the family and the confession and other things. I think it’s hard to work against the mujtama` al-ahli [laughs], we do not want to work against it, but we do not want this kind of community to enter, and to interfere in everything we’re doing. (Interview May 2009)

“Ahli” here is therefore the whole associational field tied to the sects – its religious organizations, to some extent the political parties, as well as

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128 Jad linked it to the immediate aftermath of the end of the civil war, when the militia intelligentsia changed careers to found NGOs and continued name-calling across old divides for a while.
the families that dominate the leadership of these communities. Upon a follow-up question she reiterated that even though they are not ‘against’ them, their respective goals are largely opposed, for instance in what concerns LADE’s central issue of electoral reform. ‘Ahli’ power depends on the current electoral system and the division of state and citizenry along confessional lines. Therefore LADE wants to work with those institutions that they consider to be (potentially) non-confessional, ‘civil’: they have worked with municipalities on electoral reform and helped political parties become more civil, less dependent on the big political families, for instance by offering to organize and monitor internal elections. It does so in the hope that these institutions will make state and politics function as they were designed to do.

Both the earlier history, as described by Jad, as well as more recent reverberations such as the one we in the above quote, are instructive about the self-imaginations of much of the sector. Al-mujtama` al-ahli figures as the kind of civil society ‘we’ don’t want – the civil society that is non-progressive, tied to the political establishment, to big (political) families, and to the sectarian political system of Lebanon more generally. The reverberations are generationally defined; younger respondents are unreflective or imprecise about the distinction and certainly were not aware of something like the controversies Jad referred to. Yet the discursive battle is an indication of a broader ‘ethical’ and political tension – the larger stakes with which people invest their activism or social engagement – that exist independently of familiarity with this nomenclatorial history.

From this brief introduction we can already deduce that sectarianism is a central preoccupation. The chapter will flesh out in how far and in what ways it is so, but from these Lebanese interpretations of these two synonyms we can deduce that the opposition between what is truly civil (madani) and what is confessional (ahli) associational life defines people’s self-understanding. It may be useful (Sahlins 2002: 12) to marshal comparative ethnographic work here in order to transition into an analysis of how precisely people understand the difference between the two. Thus, Hansen (2013) talks about a similar distinction in India. He explains that in India religious ‘communalism’ has always been juxtaposed to ‘secularism’ in political life. Placing each distinction in their countries’ respective historical trajectories should help to bring focus to this chapter’s questions.

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129 One younger member of the environmental organization Green Line vaguely associated mujtama` ahli with ‘the population’, but was very clear that if you’re talking about ‘NGOs’, you’re talking about madani.
Hansen’s article looks at the fundamental (though contested) norms undergirding public and political life in India. ‘Secularism’ turns out to play a central role here. Hansen argues that the value of secularism in India comes from mainly two sources. One is the (British) idea of the cultured and reasoned (reasonable) intellectual or man of public affairs, whereas the second is the trauma of Separation, which underscored the value and necessity of religious ‘tolerance’. A number of oppositions follow from this. One is that between ‘politics’ and ‘culture’ or religion. One’s religious community is the domain of culture, valuable in itself, but one that should not be mixed with politics. Politicians should therefore *transcend* religious (‘cultural’) affairs and concerns. This entails a differentiation of proper and improper public conduct. Proper, ‘secular’, conduct consists of cool speech and demeanour, shows tolerance and accommodation and derives from a sense of ‘responsibility’. The other of this secular public self takes the passions of religious life and membership (perfectly legitimate in their own domain) into the public domain, uses incendiary language, thus renouncing its sense of responsibility. These distinctions are related to a final (more implicit) opposition, which is one of class or status: the secular public self is one thought to be tied to education and its derivative middle class cultural capital, whereas the communal self would be one inhabited (so the well-educated modern individual believes) by the poorer masses.

Lebanon historically shares the concern with religious differences as the core question of the nation. The ‘solution’, cumulatively elaborated under Ottoman and French rule, and subsequently Independence, has been of a slightly different nature from that in India. The progressive institutionalization of (proportional) religious representation has led not to a state that is conceived of as ‘above’ the religious communities (see Hansen 2013: 215), but to a state that itself has become communitarian (i.e., sectarian). That means that “secularism” has also acquired a very different meaning in the Lebanese context. To be “secular” is to believe the state should not have religious adherence as the basis for its mode of operation. To be secular is to envision a (radically) different way of imagining co-existence of the sects, rather than, as in India, to subscribe to the traditional (colonial) role of the state. This kind of secularism is important in civil society. Many expect that a reduction or abolishment of sectarianism as a principle of administration will reduce corruption and counter communalist tendencies in society. Given that this political ideal is therefore situated in a different historical and semantic context, we should ask what ‘secularism’ and ‘sectarianism’ mean precisely in Lebanon. What kind of currency does it have in Lebanon? What are other oppositions that make up its
semantic complex? For instance, how do people see politics and how do they relate it to the ‘cultural’ domain? What are the ideals of public conduct and performance?

The answers to this question will be fleshed out along the chapter. One element to emphasize from the start though is one other convergence with India, which is the disdain for (‘dirty’) politics. As politics lost its paradisiacal even-handedness after the religious passions of the masses were hurled onto the public scene, so India’s middle class folks’ “impatience with the messy realities of politics” (Yanav in Hansen 2013: 224) increased. The disdain for the political is quite prominent in Lebanese civil society as well. Again, the historical and semantic context is different: there is no traditional role that politicians can fall back on, or be called to inhabit, in the eyes of civil society activists. Since the state and government were never elevated above the confessional fray, politicians are seen as inherently problematic (guilty until proven innocent) as players in a corrupted system. Subsequently, much of this chapter is about how people who want change for Lebanon try to accomplish such change without getting dragged down into the mud of messy and dirty politics. This also has consequences for what civil society ‘is’ for people: it is an alternative space, mostly for young and highly educated people, where they can rehearse their dream for a ‘civil’ society, imagine and experience what it might look like – away from other domains of their lives, dominated by sectarian realities.

While we will slowly move towards the next chapter, in which we will see how people in civil society try to address the state, this chapter discusses how in fact many organizations focus their energies on sectarian society. In sequence then, I discuss Yes to Dialogue in order to show the idea of the social as the proper domain of intervention, as against ‘politics’; to UMAM as an example of an organization that seeks to effect change in society and politics through culture; and finally, a heritage project in the neighbourhood Zoqaq al-Blat, as an example of how one might address “ahli” society directly, as well as of what putting pressure on the state in a civil way looks like. That then provides the natural bridge to the next chapter.

130 Two recurrent exceptions stood out: President Chehab was the idealized modernizer from the past (late ‘60s), curbing the power of traditional leaders and improving the quality of the bureaucracy (notably by introduction merit-based selection), whereas Minister of Interior Baroud was the recipient of much pent-up, and ultimately frustrated hope, as well as appreciation for the things he was trying to accomplish. These figures populate fantasies of “stern bureaucrats acting as impartial voices of reason and fair play from the commanding heights of the central government” (Hansen 2013: 224), except that no one in Lebanon believes that the “central government” stands on any sort of commanding height. The ‘absent state’ is too strong a counter-trope.
‘Yes to Dialogue’: politics and civility in a plural public  As mentioned, Yes to Dialogue was a program run by the organization Toward Citizenship. The organization consisted of “citizens” whose main focus is on educating and training young people to be better, i.e. more informed and engaged citizens themselves.131 They do so in a number of different programs, some of which run continuously – like Yes to Dialogue or the so-called Parliamentary Monitor – others are intermittent, like the youth training program baddi koun mas’oul (“I want to be leader”), which allows high school or college students to learn about how the political system works. The programs can also be categorized according to their purpose. Yes to Dialogue is a “dialogue” program; the Parliamentary Monitor, which keeps track policy promises of certain MPs and invites them to explain their track record, represents their “advocacy” effort; whereas baddi koun mas’oul focuses on “awareness”.132 As to ‘Yes to Dialogue’, the title is purposefully chosen: the term ‘dialogue’ is one strongly associated with high-level politics, where it functions as an incantation used to smooth over conflict, for instance when political actors from different ‘camps’ come to the “table of (national) dialogue”. Yes to Dialogue, however, wanted to claim dialogue for individual citizens. As the quote below suggests, society itself is in need of dialogue. The quote is expressive of the thesis of the territorialization of the Lebanese mind (cf. Chapter 1): the belief that the problem of Lebanon today is one of distance and misunderstanding between people who live in different social and geographical spaces, often at opposing political ends. It also expresses a hope that, should the culture of society change, people would exert pressure on politicians to conform to this new culture:

The absence of dialogue in the Lebanese arena is an existential dilemma; indeed, it is essential for multicultural societies – should they elect to remain as such – to discuss and eventually agree on a common set of values and a vision for the state and the future. To ignite dialogue at the grassroots level, and create an open space hoping that authentic interchange would one day lead to a genuine dialogue among the political class, Na-aM lil Hiwar ['Yes to Dialogue'] was launched in Beirut in February 2006. Na-aM lil Hiwar is a weekly

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132 There are other programs still. See http://na-am.org/a/. The Parliamentary Monitor, meanwhile, is also about educating MPs about what it means to be representative to citizens, when they are asked to explain their choices in parliament, and asked to do so on the basis of a policy programme (a recurrent complaint about (the more influential) politicians one can hear in civil society is that they vie for loyalty only on a personal basis, not on the basis of a political programme).
dialogue in an informal setting, where youth come to listen to a guest speaker and join in a debate and discussion afterwards.\footnote{http://www.na-am.org/dialogue/02-naam-lil-7iwar.html (accessed 2015-06-30)}

The purpose was thus to acquaint people with what it means to engage in a discussion with people you don’t know, who may come from other ‘strands of society’ (i.e. sect), and whom you disagree with. Each week (later every two weeks), the program organized a debate around a particular, current topic. Sessions have included such topics as the value added tax, shooting incidents in one of Beirut’s southern suburbs, a special (tourist and educational) project to reconstruct and sail a Phoenician boat, election specials as well as debates with electoral candidates. One or two speakers would start off by stating their opinions, after which a Q&A would follow, which sometimes evolved into sustained interaction between attendees. All of this was streamlined by a moderator, who would draw attention to or enforce norms of civil debate. For example, upon introducing a special review session of the general elections in 2009, with Ziad Baroud as acting Prime Minister and Gilbert Doumit as the coordinator of the election observations, the moderator spelled out the “conditions” of the debate, like stating your name, following order, asking questions instead of making statements, being succinct, but also not straying from the topic at hand, which was the process of the election, not the actual election itself. So if people could please cast their partisan colours for the night. Staying away from politics is an important norm and it shows us something essential about (Lebanese) civil society. In the following I’ll show what this norm is about, by going through an example of how one can properly talk about sensitive issues, without getting ‘political’. The example consists of a special session on “The Civil War According to 3 Different Generations” (April 2010, see picture on following page). The session was meant as a kind of revitalization of the Yes to Dialogue programme (“it’s not just a hiwar, it’s an event…”), which had suffered from declining audience numbers for some time. To start off with a topic that was surely to speak to the imagination, the new organizer wanted to put the programme back on the (civil) map. The questions that framed the discussion were formulated from the perspective of the youth, as the moderator explained.

“Just to remind you, we haven’t come here today to know what were the causes, who killed whom or whatever. We are a new generation, perhaps there are people present from a previous generation as well,
but [most of us] were born in the 80s and 90s, we haven’t lived the war as much. We wouldn’t like, maybe, to go into the details [na’rif hal ‘umūr al-day’a], as much as we would like to know our past, so that we can plan for our future, and this is the basis upon which we will dialogue today.”

The speakers were then introduced – the representative of the ‘old’ generation, who really lived through the war, the president of the Former Lebanese Political Detainees in Syria; a consultant who was invited to talk about his personal experiences as a schoolboy during the war; and finally an ‘expert’, a social scientist, born in the 1980s who was asked to give a more impartial “conclusion” to the debate (incidentally, the expert in question was an UMAM employee). After their short talks, the moderator from Nahwa al-Muwatiniya opened the floor for questions. After suggesting the kinds of questions one might ask each participants, he reiterated the theme of his earlier introduction as the fundamental line of questioning:

“We as youth today, to what extent are we ready, maybe... so the circumstances just got a bit more complicated, but to what extent are we ready to go forward? To what extent should we look back, while we’re going forward? Cause we don’t want to, to look back. But how much do we need [lāzim] to look back in order to move [forward]? Do we need [bi-hāja] to know our past, to go forward? Do we need to know what happened? Do we need to take on more expertise to know how to face our future, to create the social harmony that Mr. Sevag talked about earlier? I don’t know, let’s start the dialogue together, if someone wants to start, please”.

The moderator appears to already place some safeguards against the discussion going in the wrong direction. We’ll see that he will attempt to keep these safeguards in place during the debate.

I’ll start out with an example of the normative way of debating (‘political’) issues in public. Let’s turn to the opening question from the public after our moderator’s invitation. The speaker introduced his question by invoking the recurrence of violence in Lebanon. “The problem of Lebanon is but one, a small problem. There are sects that do not trust each other”. One has weapons, the other is afraid”. While the phrasing is generic – “there are sects” - it is clear to all those present that he is talking about Hizbullah (who has weapons), and about the Christians (who are afraid). The speaker, after specifying that fear, went on to present the
following recommendation. I will quote it at length to give some context, but the crux in the quote lies in him shying away from becoming specific.

So there’s but one thing to learn from the past. That we have to let people trust each other \textit{nkhali al-nās tūsa bi-ba’ d}, to get the one who’s carrying weapons, for whatever reasons, I don’t want get into names \textit{fūt bi-‘asmā’}, to give the opportunity to settle, to one of these days tell us, ok, I fulfilled what’s important to me, come and let’s work together for the country.\footnote{He later actually does mention names, explicitly framing it as such as well, as if careful to acknowledge his infraction of proper public discursive etiquette. “If that would happen, if it were possible – I’m going to mention names of political leaders now – if Samir Geagea goes to Haret Hreik to give a speech, and Nasrallah goes to Achrafieh to give a speech, the situation may be defused. If only these two people would go to each other’s regions, the reasons for war would dwindle”. Also note the territorial imagination of the political process here.}

The qualifier “I don’t want to get into names” is the literal expression of a discursive rule to not get specific, a rule that tends to make for a somewhat peculiar, generic form of discussion and one that holds for many discussions I’ve heard at such events. People do not address (political) issues head-on, instead they side-step it through some generic formulation, even if presumably everyone is quite capable of reading between the lines and assume which names go in the blanks. The rule isn’t absolute and with a topic such as the civil war it is easy to transgress it. However, as I show in the example below, the rule is policed. One presumes out of fear of a derailment of the discussion into heated name-calling, or perhaps because a deep-seated conviction of what civil society is for – to foster and cater to a different kind of “activist” consciousness which cannot get bogged down by “politics” (in the Lebanese sense of the word). In the example below, we can see that getting into names triggers an intervention by the moderator.

A young woman who identified herself as being from a village in the Shouf mountain addressed the difference between forgiveness and forgetting. Forgiveness has been one of the themes addressed by the second panel speaker: what to forgive and when to forget? It’s an important question to her, because, as she said, “there are consequences [English in original] till this day”. The consequences she seemed to hint at is that of continuing to show allegiance to those who plunged the country into an interminable war. She segues into an example – the (virtually uncontest-ed) leader of the Druze and head of the Progressive Socialist Party (cf. Chapter 1), Walid Jumblatt.
Druze girl: Walid Jumblatt, that I unfortunately once followed, said in every one of his speeches “I decided to forget, but I didn’t forget. And I didn’t forgive”. And then he says how at his palace [qasr] he dialogues and sits at the same table with those who killed his father. I would like to turn to Jumblatt and ask him, as a Druze, how could he sell out his father [“his father’s blood”]? He who sells out his father, couldn’t he also sell out his people? He says he protects the sect and our honour. But our honour is also Lebanon’s honour. And Lebanon’s honour [lies] in all of Lebanon. Kamal Jumblatt was a great leader (za’im) but not a politician. Those who read Kamal Jumblatt’s history you will know that he was not...

Moderator: [cuts her off] I’m sorry we don’t really want to get into politics
She: No, ok
Moderator: we are talking ‘socially’
She: My point [naẓari] is social, the issue is we are electing him again. We are electing him again since 2000.
with their leaders – arguably a social problem. At least she was allowed to carry on for a while without further interruption (although it takes a while for murmuring in the room to quiet down again). At a certain point however, she’s cut off again. After having explained that Lebanese youth are taught from early on to categorize and evaluate each other on the basis of sectarian identity, the cruelty of which she had to learn when she came to Lebanon in 7th grade, she conveyed her most important lesson: that the Lebanese “need to appreciate each other as human beings [bashar]”, rather than as members of religious communities. She went on:

I respect Samir Geagea\footnote{Samir Geagea, head of the Christian militia-then-party The Lebanese Forces. When the girl mentions he paid for what he did, she refers to the fact that he was imprisoned on charges of bombing a church and released after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. The bombing took place after the war though, so technically he did not ‘pay for what he did during the civil war’, just like every political leader whose power goes back to that time, courtesy of the general amnesty law.} for that, I imagine he’s the only human being [\textit{insān}] among politicians who paid for what he did. General Aoun, he has reformist ideas, but…

Moderator: we don’t want to talk about politicians, the dialogue is about social things.

She: these \textit{are} social issues. [overlapping statements] OK, I hope – I don’t have right to vote yet and I hope that every one of you, I imagine you’re older than me and can vote. I hope that when you cast your vote you look back and remember all those who died, for instance, in your case [to one of the speakers], your father died, you have to remember all those who died and suffered, that you keep in mind (\textit{ḥoṣṭ \textit{idām} `ayūnak}) those who are either in prisons or [died in] explosions. [inaudible] I hope that when you go to vote that you think of them, we’re repeating our history again and bringing the curse on ourselves (\textit{minjib al balā’ la halnā}). Thank you.

As soon as she mentioned names again, the moderator intervened to redirect the discussion to proper topics.

In order to show how particular this way of talking is, I’m going to briefly leap back to Khandaq with a contrasting example of ‘political talk’. The contrast makes clear there is something peculiar about ‘civil dreams’, or more precisely, what ‘civil society’ (as a discursive practice) allows people to publicly dream about and how. Early 2011, Abu Zalem invited the head of one of the secular, left-wing parties, Najah Wakim, to speak about his recent trip to Syria. After he gave his talk, answered a few questions
and left, Abu Zalem, some members of his loyal clique and a few visitors from a neighbourhood across town, retreat into Abu Zalem’s office and rehearse what they have heard. At a certain point, Abu Zalem goes off on a tangent about one of his pet-peeves: the decline of pan-Arab currents in the region.

AZ: Get that into your head, that Marxist philosophy, and the communist idea, and and and… started a revolution! But today, if you want the right thinking (fikr sahih) to enter people’s minds, people bury it. Today, what’s accepted [thinking]? Sectarian thinking [fikr al-mazhab wal-ta’ifah] Today, a shaykh or a professor who costs a hundred million dollars, nobody will take notice, but a shaykh who costs a handful of tea and bag of cookies, and speaks slander… Take Ahmad Assir\(^\text{136}\), go figure how many people he amasses. Then take Muhsen Ibrahim. The engineer of the National Movement\(^\text{137}\) and the PLO. If President Hafez al-Assad, what did he say? ‘If I got stuck in a pickle, and I’d see no solution, I would call Muhsen Ibrahim and he’d solve it’. Yasser Arafat says he’s the engineer of the Palestinian Resistance. And where’s he now, Muhsen Ibrahim?

Visitor: he is isolated [mitqawqa` `ala bāb bi-bayto]

AZ: Sitting at home. And Ahmad Assir? He became a za’im. Shahhal\(^\text{138}\) – za’im. Adnan Traboulsi\(^\text{139}\) – za’im. We don’t want to mention any other names to not upset those with whom we stand. All who come on television [are replacing] those who can talk. They’ve all become political bosses! And people listen to them, calling it great news while they’re eating shit\(^\text{140}\)! Worthless speeches [haki ma bya’rifu yihku]. There’s no place for you anymore, man! Well, there is a place – commit to sectarian speak and people will get so scared that the hair on their body will stand up. They will say ‘the Sunna will kill us so watch out’!, and ‘the Shia want to kill us so watch out!’…

As you can see, ‘getting into names’ is an integral aspect of this kind of public speaking and reasoning. Political characters are exemplars of things good and bad in Lebanon, or cases through which to explore the good and bad. At the end of the chapter I go into reasons where this con-

\(^\text{136}\) A Salafi cleric and leader of recent prominence and of particular concern to these men.

\(^\text{137}\) Left-wing coalition in first years of civil war.

\(^\text{138}\) Salafi cleric from Tripoli, north of Lebanon.

\(^\text{139}\) Ex-MP for the Ahbash (strict Sufi Sunni movement), close to Hizbullah. See following sentence.

\(^\text{140}\) Is also a colloquialism for ‘fucking/getting fucked’.
trast with ‘civil’ talk might come from. For now I stick with the observation that ‘politics’ is a concern (in the sense that ‘specifics’ are) for people in civil society, and explore how one might cope with the injunction against it, while still attempting to achieve social or political change. I do so by examining an NGO dedicated to publicly processing the memories of the (civil) war.

‘UMAM’: “Non-politics as golden cover for political action” The directors of the following NGO also recognize and make the distinction between the social and the political, just like the moderators of Yes to Dialogue did. However, these directors are meta-reflexively purposeful in making the distinction. Ideally their NGO would in fact work in the opposite manner from Yes to Dialogue, because UMAM, or ‘UMAM Documentation & Research’ as its full name runs, attempts to open up a (‘social’ or ‘cultural’) space where people can actually ‘get into specifics’. If my reading above about the taboo of such a discursive practice during civil society events is correct, that would not be an easy thing to do. Below therefore, I show some of the challenges it faces in doing so.

The organization was founded by former publicist Lokman Slim and his German partner, Monika Borgmann, and it seeks to address what it perceives as one of the foundational problems of Lebanese society – that the war has never been dealt with in a public way, that its memory remains suppressed, and that antipathies still linger underneath the surface. This is in fact a widely shared diagnosis, according to which the sectarian enmities that have come out of the war constitute in fact the main stumbling block for Lebanon’s future. UMAM has developed its own approach to this issue through a quasi-academic format. The organization started out by building an archive – interviewing actors and collecting documents of the war – but it quite quickly branched out into the organization of events that would hopefully provoke and organize some form of public deliberation. Thus, its first official public action as an organization was the screening of a documentary film about the origins of the civil war (for which Jocelyn Saab, a well-known Lebanese film maker, interviewed contemporaneous actors).\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{141} The first event they organized officially as UMAM is paradigmatic in that sense. The poster they designed for Saab’s screening (‘Le Liban dans la Tourmente’, in French, with Arabic fragments, without subtitles) showed all the “heroes” from the war – that is, all those political leaders and figures from that time who are still ‘leading’ Lebanon now. It acts as a visual expression of a past that lives on and also reveals the desire to be confrontational, provocative (by visually identifying political actors).
While the archive hadn’t opened to the public at the time of research\textsuperscript{142}, UMAM did ‘diffuse’ some of the information gathered in the archive in exhibitions or one-night discussion events. The type of events they held included film screenings, art exhibitions (installations or visual art, sometimes travelling exhibits, sometimes curated by UMAM), and publication events. Thus, they had held recurrent ‘Missing’ exhibitions, about the thousands of people reported missing during the civil war; screened documentaries it had co-produced such as interviews with former fighters; or external fiction and documentary film screenings. These latter documentaries are often about other cases of civil war (the Balkan, Iraq), undoubtedly in the hope of sparking new perspectives and reflections on what Lebanon has gone through. Ultimately, the goal of such events was to create an “informed citizenship” (interview employee UMAM, March 2010): by organizing the lectures and debates, by opening up the archives, the institution would facilitate a culture of dialogue and openness.

As an explication of what it drives at with such a culture, we can take the screening of another movie about the civil war, called “Chou Sar” (‘What Happened?’). A 2009 documentary by DeGaulle Eid, it documents the search by the film maker to uncover and indict the people who were behind the 1980 murder of his parents, sister and eleven other family members. The film was banned in Lebanon. Eid explains why in the following interview\textsuperscript{143}:

\begin{quote}
Some will tell you, as the General Security did, ‘why did you name names’? The reason for the ban is that I name names. Well, who gave him the right to say, ‘well since you name names or political parties you have to cut our parts of the film’?
\end{quote}

The ‘right’ for this kind of censorship was a ruling tied to the policy of general amnesty for all participants in the 1975-1990 wars. In the interest of ‘closing the files’, the General Security’s censorship department was given the legal authority to hush public discussions about what happened during those years. Such legislature is of course at the heart of what UMAM identifies as what is wrong with Lebanon today. Perhaps

\textsuperscript{142} In order to be opened to the public, the archive still needed an effective catalogue for it to be searchable, but they were also wary of actual political intervention. There would be some juridical space (see below) for politicians to confiscate material implicating certain persons on the grounds that it would be incendiary and threaten the safety of those individuals. UMAM itself also wasn’t sure how people would react. (Informal interview with anonymous UMAM employee, March 2010)

\textsuperscript{143} In a fragment that was taken up in a YouTube presentation of the film at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN3k_Mz10xA. (accessed 29-06-2015)
unsurprisingly therefore, the documentary was screened for the first time by UMAM in 2012, after some public pressure caused PM Ziad Baroud to “personally intervene” and create a special decree that would allow the film to be screened in “academic contexts”. UMAM’s legitimation of showing the film (despite or perhaps because of its censorship):

*Chou Sar?* is simply a film. However, as evidenced by the debate it caused, it is one powerful enough to disclose the depth of the inter-Lebanese disagreement over what is to be done about our past, the extent to which it haunts our present, and how likely it is to inflame simmering tensions. From that perspective, an act of censorship based on a prediction that the cultural or intellectual work in question may provoke latent tensions or endanger “civil peace” should be considered a normal response—albeit one implemented by elements of the same political establishment that has failed to place this country on the path toward real, lasting pacification. Therefore, demonstrating passively our opposition to censorship, such as by watching a film like *Chou Sar?*, represents the most elemental method available to express public disapproval with the enduring philosophy of sweeping our dust under the rug.\(^{144}\)

As you can see, it is precisely the taboo of being specific in public (self-censorship) that animates UMAM’s endeavours. But how open can this self-liberating culture be? Some of these events do not relate directly to Lebanese experiences, and these are perhaps the most ‘academic’ events: they tend to provoke reflection of a more general sort of nature (and thus would not necessarily promote ‘specific’ discussions). Yet, others follow directly out of the Lebanese context and therefore speak directly so certain people’s interests. In these later cases, the desire to speak openly, or to educate people about the past, would clash with the general injunction to never go into the specifics of such topics (publically). How does UMAM deal with that contradiction? How would UMAM try to circumvent or neutralize these taboos?

Slim has his own way of thinking about this. Consider his response to my question after UMAM’s ‘founding moment’. At the beginning of his answer, he pointed out that he didn’t think there was really one founding moment. Instead he traced the beginnings of UMAM back to a growing consciousness of different techniques of “tackling issued related to the res publica”. His training in a leftist party/militia during the war years

had endowed him with a sense of the value of education – which had been a fundamental component of military training and a sine qua non for advancement within the party – and thus the value of words as transformational force.

if have to trace this interest in intervention [in] different ways, like words, other words, printed words, then pictures, footages, cinema, then perhaps it’s coming from this belief that politics is a kind of a short-lived intervention, especially in a country like Lebanon, when, if you’re not the son of, if you’re not backed by a za‘im, if you want to keep a certain independence, the so-called ‘non-political’ activism is kind of golden cover of any political action, because it’s much more sustainable, it can survive, whereas you would have to make concessions regarding your political stance. You can continue to be more radical, intellectually, whereas you’d be required for political reasons to be less radical.

Then in the post-war period, he learned that sometimes political topics and issues can best be dealt with indirectly anyway – say through ‘cultural’ events. That way, you deflect the discussion away from those it intends, which may be necessary, for those people might intervene and shut down the discussion (and possibly those discussing). At least, this is something he witnessed when the country was still under Syrian tutelage (or “occupation” as Slim insists). While organizing ‘cultural’ events though, you can still propagate new ideas, seed the right questions and foster critical attitudes. In other words, the balancing act is all about being ‘non-political’ while potentially and surreptitiously engaging in ‘political talk’ all the same. (Note that in addition to the reason for avoiding specifics that was cited in relation to Chou Sar – namely, the fear it might quicken latent tensions - Slim thus mentions another rationale, namely that people with vested interests do not want you talking about those things.)

How do these techniques work out in practice? As a case-study, I’ll take the screening of an oral history documentary that UMAM had been commissioned to make about the neighbourhood of Zoqaq al-Blat. The documentary, “Migration Alley”, elicits people’s memories of the various waves of migration into the neighbourhood since roughly the 1940s. In doing so, it invites their reflections about the changing built environment

145 Part of the Taif agreements that formed the basis for the official 1990 cease-fire was that Syria would have far-reaching prerogatives and (military) presence in Lebanon, officially in order to help prevent it from sliding back into violence.
as well. The general narrative of the documentary is that of a transformation of a ‘bourgeois’ neighbourhood into a popular area. It was commissioned for an urban heritage project called ‘From the Alphabet to the Renaissance’, a project I describe in greater detail in the following section. The screening of the Zoqaq al-Blat documentary drew an almost full house: the UMAM “hangar”, a converted factory space situated in the northern section of the southern suburbs, hosted about 200 people (of a total capacity of approximately 300). After the screening, one of the consultant-employees of UMAM, Marie-Claud Soueid, took the mic and introduced various people involved with the heritage project, and in particular Marie-Claude Bitar, the events coordinator of the project, and Karim Hakim, co-director of the film, for the Q&A. UMAM Q&As are seldom successful in retaining people’s attention, which may be due in part to the fact that it does not have a clear idea about who its audience is. This shows in quite basic operational matters, such as language choice. This evening also was plagued with Babylonic confusions, with Hakim speaking in English and translating himself into Arabic; with Bitar speaking in French, because she did not feel comfortable holding forth in Arabic; and Soueid somewhat clumsily translating Bitar into a mix of modern standard Arabic and colloquial (Lebanese) Arabic, a mix that was undoubtedly an expression of some of her own discomfort with public oratory in Arabic. The translations were a gesture to the expat contingent among the audience, though Soueid had hoped (as she confessed to me later) that the public would be the French educated Beirut bourgeoisie. It wasn’t. Not entirely at least.

The diversity of the audience and the difficulty UMAM had in adapting to that diversity reverberated in the discussion that followed. In general, the discussion failed to establish a common definition of the situation. In particular, there were two competing lines of interpretation of what the film was about: one was whether it was about sectarianism and communitarian co-existence or about social class (and class co-existence). The second, which ran through and parallel to the first, was whether it was about ‘heritage’ or about the everyday experience of the neighbourhood. Perhaps the most significant dynamic for our purposes here is the tension between sectarianism and social class. Several people from the audience picked up on the element of the breakdown of communitarian co-existence over the years, with the various political crises, street altercations and outright war. However, this was an element that was downplayed in

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146 At a certain point she – hopefully – asked the audience if sticking to French wouldn’t be good enough.
the documentary, which, as Hakim explained, was primarily about the contrast of old wealth and the contemporary lower-class population:

The movie started with a simple observation, when you go to Zoqaq al-Blat, one of the first things that struck [me] is, these big, old British houses and the category of people living there, it’s a bit contradictory, like bourgeois houses with a very popular class of people. So the first question I wanted to answer, how come? And the best way to answer was to go back in history, from the start of Zoqaq al-Blat, to how it became what it is today. That was mainly the idea that motivated the movie.

Bitar, meanwhile, wanted to emphasize culture, heritage, and history, over and against questions of sect and class. When Soueid invited her on stage to introduce the larger project (of which the film was a part), it became clear that her imagined audience (much like Soueid’s) consisted of neighbourhood outsiders, not the residents who were likely present as well.

From there, we organised, we set up a project with St. Joseph University and UMAM and the idea was in fact to draw attention – to firstly turn Zoqaq al-Blat into a pilot project – and to draw attention to the history of all of Beirut’s neighbourhoods, so that everyone in fact, rediscovers his history and to reconnect to history, his own history and the history of his quarter and, in the end, the history of his country. You can actually see that quite well in the film that Karim just showed – I’ll tell you right away, it’s by the way the first time I see it, so it’s with a really new look, let’s say. [Soueid’s translation in Arabic] But Zoqaq al-Blat lives again, because the neighbourhoods have changed with the war, that’s normal. But there is a heritage of the past that we need to go back to, because it is our treasure [richesse] and if we want to go towards the future, I think the best way would be to start by knowing one’s past.

She does want to talk about ‘sect’ in one sense, but only in its positive dimension – namely, what you might call the heritage of co-existence (and other cosmopolitan accomplishments\textsuperscript{147}) – the ultimate value of that heritage, also in its physical manifestations.

\textsuperscript{147} ‘One aspect of the project that that hasn’t been talked about in the film, but one which is very rich [dense], is the cultural aspect of Zoqaq al-Blat. Zoqaq al-Blat has a great many schools, that have hosted the most prestigious teachers of the Arab world, who have created the Arab Nahda, and the Lebanese need to know this, that it was these among others who created a new dynamic for (redynamisé) the Arabic language, so it was important that this history, which belongs to all, would again be brought to light through this project’.
Yet at several reprises, questions from the audience steered the conversation back to sectarian communities. One man points to the ‘fact’ that the bourgeoisie that settled in the area was largely a Christian bourgeoisie.

For sure, if this film talks about the issue in an anthropological manner, or sociologically, the question is how did this neighbourhood change from one where most people were Christian to one where the majority is Muslim? And that Islamic majority means there’s now only a reduced diversity. Of course, it isn’t easy to treat this [topic] in an artistic way, but how should we understand it, this issue in the wounded memory of Beirut?

Hakim countered that in fact the bourgeoisie was Muslim as well, and that focusing on this aspect wouldn’t teach you as much about the neighbourhood anyway. That is not what you wonder about when you first enter the area: “it’s the contradiction between the social classes that strikes the eye”. The next question wondered about the differences between different denominations on the Sunni side. Hakim answered that in his conversations these differences did not come up in any substantial way. There was no “discourse” about these kinds of oppositions. There were remarks about the events of 2008, but generally sectarian relations wasn’t something people talked about. When there was a follow-up remark that things look different in the neighbouring area Mousseitbe, to which Hakim quipped that that’ll be the sequel, Soueid intervened and steered the topic away from the issue of the relationship between the sects. Instead, she said, we want the discussion focus more on “history”, not on the “results”. Again, then, just as things were getting specific – that is, just as people started talking about identifiable constituents of the Lebanese polity (sects) – the moderator drew the line of what may be properly discussed. Even in the context of an organization that hopes to break through (or at least expand) the limits of proper discussion, it proves difficult to skirt the limits into the domain of the political (sectarian relations). Instead the moderator opted to stay within the domain of the social and/or cultural (history).

There is clearly a desire then to be radical in a critique of Lebanese social norms (regarding the war) and politics (certainly by the directors). Secular commitments are evident in the mistrust of established political interests, intimately tied to the sectarian system and it hush-up compromise after the war. However, there are factors that mitigate that desire. One factor – one I haven’t drawn attention to thus far – is that an organization like UMAM is part of the NGO world, dependent on funding, especially from
outside Lebanon\textsuperscript{148}, which cannot but direct projects in a more quietist direction (as the sustainability of the donor’s presence in the country is at stake). That would favour a more academic format. The kind of public it therefore attracted and catered to was less capable of intervening decisively in the public sphere, the kind of intervention Slim so desperately wanted, because it would have come interested in a more general reflection and more general changes (in contrast to a public that had personal stakes in the matter). A second factor are the norms of public discourse in Lebanon. Slim was clearly aware of these norms (and he explains their existence in light of the political climate and its policy of general amnesty and amnesia), and so he recognized the limits of a provocative style. This is why he works through the cultural and social domain, why UMAM works through films and like events. It is with the aim of changing citizenry – for which it deploys its own term: “informed citizenry” – in the hope that such citizenry would ultimately change the political landscape. However, that does put the organization in something of a catch 22. On the one hand, its ambition is to transform public space, but the way it has to operate makes it difficult to tap into a (potential) segment of their audience, the people who come there to really say something about their own experiences – not to ‘be informed’.

\textit{‘Zoqaq Reborn’: Recapturing the spirit of a golden age of co-existence} The main example I discuss in this chapter is a project that grew out of a EU-funded comparative study of ‘urban regeneration’ of historical areas in Mediterranean port cities (Istanbul, Beirut, Oran and El Mina), called Archimedes. MAJAL, the ‘urban observatory’ of Balamand University’s Academy of Fine Arts, was contracted to execute the study for Beirut. After the mandate finished and the money ran out, the people at MAJAL had been enthused about what actually seemed possible for the regeneration of Beirut’s historical areas, and had become conscious of the urgency of the task, given the current speed of their demise. Because they were unable the municipal authorities committed, they decided to launch a pilot-project to draw attention to the issue and to exert pressure on local government. They focussed their efforts on the area of Zoqaq al-Blat, a neighbourhood that is part of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century belt around the old, essentially medieval city of Beirut (which is more or less the current Downtown area). They chose Zoqaq al-Blat for two reasons. They considered the neighbourhood to have an exemplary historical role in national

\textsuperscript{148} In the case of UMAM that includes the USAID (controversial in civil society and broadly seen as rather conservative).
identity and culture and it still possessed a significant number of build-
ings that dated from that history. Now, hopefully, it would also play an
exemplary role in how patrimonial Beirut might yet be protected, across
the city’s historical neighbourhoods.
More concretely, the idea for the project – ‘From the Alphabet to the
Renaissance’ (see pictures on page 194) – was to invite people from across
Beirut to get up close and personal with the area’s history and remain-
ing ‘landmarks’ and to interest the municipality in taking the action it
could in preserving them. According to the official launching statement,
its objective is “the urban renovation of Zoqaq al-Blat through culture”,
and hopes to involve all those who “subscribe to the importance of the
preservation of cultural and architectural heritage that all of the Lebanese
share”. Over the course of two out of three planned events in a period of
9 months, the project – for which mAJAL teamed up with Marie-Claude
Bitar as event organizer and Liliane Barakat from St. Joseph University
for historical documentation – organized an initial bus tour, guided walk-
ing tours, a ‘light and sound’ show about the area149, a short film with oral
history interviews (the documentary discussed in the preceding section
about UMAM), a photo exhibition of life in the area today, a ‘traditional
food’ market, a number of discussion sessions, as well as the publication
of informational materials about the area. In the words of the press state-
ment: “We aim to benefit as much as possible from the many opportuni-
ties that Zoqaq al-Blat offers us to highlight its institutional and human
capital, in the framework of the speedy rejuvenation of this neighbour-
hood”.
In the next chapter I discuss this project with more detailed attention
to what it amounted to in practice, in particular the connections people
from the project were able to make – with media, politicians and people
with varying ties to the neighbourhood. Here, as per the general aim of
this chapter, I maintain focus on its self-understanding – as a civil society
project – and extricate its conceptualizations of state, society and nation.
I start with the idea(l) of the nation that animated the project’s ambi-
tions. The project is interesting for the purposes of this chapter, because it

149 The show – an animation film with accompanying atmospheric light projections –
reached back to the Phoenicians and described their seafaring exploits and more particularly
their invention of the alphabet. The project at several points drew an explicit continuity
between the beginning of the alphabet and Zoqaq al-Blat’s printed culture in the 19th century.
This fits within a particular kind of imagination of Lebanon (found in part both among bour-
geois intellectual circles and the Christian population) that Liliane Barakat also invoked during
a conference: “after all, we’re pretty proud of the Phoenician alphabet”. More pragmatically
though, the connection with the Phoenician Alphabet was the basis for their successful bid to
secure funding from the ‘Beirut Book Capital 2010’ foundation.
allows us to get a more precise sense of civil society’s political imagination. The ideals its protagonists tended to stand for were projected – and thus specified in greater illustrative detail – onto (the history of) a neighbourhood: Zoqaq al-Blat. Specifically, that neighbourhood was seen to have embodied an ideal of a ‘proto-secular’ (that is, religiously plural but peacefully coexisting) society and a cosmopolitan culture. It did so during the so-called Arab Renaissance, which roughly runs from the second half of the 19th to the first decades of the 20th century. The Renaissance (Nahda) combined the bloom of printed culture (in literature and press) following the adaptation of the Arabic alphabet to the printing press; the modernization of society, for instance by the adoption of new peda-
gogical philosophies; and dreams of national Arab independence (from Ottoman and European overlords). Cairo is generally considered to be the centre of all that movement, but Beirut had its own role to play, not in the least by serving as host to the first Arabic printing press.

For the second round of guided tours, the project also produced a short film about the history of Beirut and Zoqaq al-Blat’s role in it. The film became the start of the guided tour, screened in the chapel of the Greek-Catholic school. The film picked up on themes found in all the project’s publication materials and served to illustrate in greater detail the historical imagination just outlined. It consisted of a narrator accompanying a number of historical images. The narrator explained the area “prospers because of the religious diversity and the installation of the grand families”. Striking about this diversity is that “despite differences, the inhabitants coexist in symbiosis” and thus “cultural movements flourish and diversify”. It is also the place where the fundamental questions of the Lebanese nation and the co-existence of its sects were posed for the first time by the intellectual avant-garde. ‘Who are we?’, was Boutros Boustani’s “famous question”. His answer, so the narrator went on to explain, was that the different genealogies to which members of each community trace their identity are actually “factors of our weakness”. His and other intellectuals’ humanist ideals thus made them into pioneer citizens. The new ideas that arose out of the area’s diversity went hand in hand with other valuable developments: associational activity, the expansion of science and knowledge, its institutionalization in schools and its distribution through publishers, in particular linguistic knowledge and study. Moreover, the narrator explained, these pioneers were important in showing us that learning foreign languages is a source of knowledge (and can be used to strengthen rather than weaken Arab culture). Those familiar with Lebanon will immediately recognize themes important to many of the (bourgeois) intelligentsia that this film conveys: the misgivings about sectarianism (both as cause and as result of the war), the cele-

150 The grand or great families, i.e., those (Beiruti) families that became wealthy in the economic surge of the time and managed to hold on to their economic and especially political privileges over the generations to follow.
151 One of the prime intellectuals of the Lebanese province in the mid-19th century. Worked on the Arabic translation of the Bible, dabbled in Arabic linguistics and pedagogy, and wrote (Syrian) nationalist pamphlets in shocked reaction to the Druze-Christian ‘civil war’ in 1860. Also founded a sort of non-confessional school in Zoqaq al-Blat.
152 Somewhat ironically, the movie was set to French (a fact that met with some murmurs from the public). However, most of the people in the audience most likely spoke French anyways, as the guided tours in French were the most numerous and the largest, followed by English and then Arabic. (When the only Arabic tour guide turned out to be a veiled student, a friend remarked: oh my, could they [the USJ] have been anymore stereotypical?)
bration of civil society (rich associational activity that forms the backbone of a peaceful society), and cosmopolitanism (a Lebanon that is rooted as much in the West as in the East). To varying degrees and in varying forms, these themes are equally important in civil society. The neighbourhood was therefore made to symbolize in many ways the reform project of civil society in Lebanon more generally.

Which are the institutions and actors that project directors with such an historical and national imagination would identify as partners and public? The documentary mentioned “pioneer citizens”. What kind of vision of Zoqaq al-Blat’s citizens did MAJAL et al. have, whom did they appeal to and mobilize to do what? The identification first requires a diagnosis of the problem, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, turns out to be a nation degenerated into (or at least in danger of degenerating into) the opposite of its historical ideal. In an introduction to the project’s mission statement, president of St. Joseph University René Chamousi expressed the hope it could bring people ‘from different places’ together. Serge Yazigi, MAJAL’s director, explicated the reasoning behind that hope. He wanted the project to recreate some of that historical symbiosis and cross-community cooperation. One of the main problems of Beirut, he said, is that it is falling apart into islands of communities tightly knit into their own piece of urban fabric, with nothing to tie them together. (Interview July 2009) This is a result of the civil war, for sure, but the current destruction of the old urban fabric (to make way for new ‘tower’ developments) is making the problem worse. That is why the tourist trail could be so important, because it would connect these different spaces for people who have never or not for a long time made it ‘across’. For the events themselves, he hoped that, when people do make it across, and they’d see the neighbourhood and its beauty and recognize its history as their own, they would start caring for it much like they would for their own neighbourhoods. (So that when a building faces the threat of demolition, they perceive it as a threat to their own space and will jump into action, building a stronger front for the preservation of what we have left of that history.) Yazigi therefore located the project’s ‘citizens’ in the first instance outside of the neighbourhood. He wanted them to do one thing: to ‘care’. He was not very specific about how, but generally speaking, to help exert pressure on government to take appropriate action (for more on such pressure and on the kind of appropriate action he was thinking of, see a few paragraphs down). He also located his target citizens in the neighbourhood itself, though. In a sense, they were the primary public, when they first starting thinking about ‘urban regeneration through culture’. But as they found little resonance (see Introduction), they figured they needed
outsiders looking in in order to open the eyes of ‘the community’. Maybe then they could realize the real objective: to get representatives of and organizations of the different communities rooted in the neighbourhood to cooperate. “[Ultimately], we don’t care about the buildings, maybe we won’t succeed in saving them, but the social and cultural fabric [is what counts]” (interview July 2009).

For not only between neighbourhoods, but also within the neighbourhood, people retreat into their ever decreasing social spaces. The different communities, their institutions, even in a diverse area such as Zoqaq al-Blat, don’t talk with one another. Yazigi told of the difficult beginnings of the project, when “nobody believed in it”. When people told them that the country had more pressing issues to deal with, when the mistrust among community representatives towards each other as well as towards the project was palpable. But with their enthusiasm and persistence, Yazigi & Co. were able to start things moving a bit, and they called out whom they deemed to be the primary stakeholders – the heads of the different religious, educational and cultural establishments in the area – as well as some press to a general meeting. The meeting took place on the premises of the prime Sunni charity, the Maqassed. At a certain point during the meeting, one of the religious representatives got up, and made a confession. Yazigi quoted him to me:

“At the start we didn’t believe in you, in the project, [it would be] yet another one that would do nothing at all, but now I have to say, ‘shame on us,’ that we haven’t taken action ourselves before, because this is for us, for our neighbourhood, in which we are rooted. I offer my apologies, in the name of my colleagues, whom I do not know. I have lived here for decades and I do not know you. This is the first time I set foot in your establishment”.

This is obviously a key moment for Yazigi, a step towards the reconstitution of the cosmopolitan spirit of the neighbourhood, towards rebuilding some of that cross-community cooperation, and thus to rekindle its torch. The significance of the apology aside, the community and the stakeholders in the neighbourhood were apparently identified firstly on the basis of the official confessional communities, and were, secondly, confined to (the representatives of) the official institutions and organizations of these communities: the managers of the schools, houses of worship and administrative seats, but also social organizations such as the scouts, which are tied to the political parties that represent each confession. This particular operationalization of ‘the community’ follows in part from the urbanist
nature of the project. It follows the buildings as it were: the most prominent patrimonial buildings of the area are those that belong to a religious endowment (waqf). This social and legal characteristic of these buildings also implies that they are not (as) likely to be sold and that there are some funds available for their renovation and maintenance. It also falls in line, however, with the diagnosis of the problem: that Lebanon is falling apart into islands of confessional communities, each failing to identify with a shared identity (and as a consequence, the powers that be are able to parcel up the public good and run away with the loot).

I recap briefly. In line with the outline of the ideal nation – based on the historical ideal type Yazigi and Barakat reconstructed – the project sought to encourage citizens to be part of something bigger, to share an identity and protect what is valuable – to not let vested (material) interests and the corresponding short-sighted politics have the vote on what happens. The citizens it identified – or the publics it addressed – are mainly two in kind: people outside of the neighbourhood, ignorant of the area’s value but “likely to be interested in matters of heritage” (Yazigi); and representatives of communal (confessional) institutions and organizations, familiar with the area, but seemingly ignorant of its true value. Each public has a slightly different role to play, even though Yazigi & Co. seemingly had not thought on any concrete level on what that might be: they expected, or at least hoped, the outsiders to exert pressure on government in face of vital threats to the nation’s heritage, while the communities needed to dialogue and work together.

There is one last pillar of civil society that had an important role to play, in Yazigi’s eye: the media. The media had to buttress the work they were trying to do with their publics. They were supposed to make the outsider citizens “feel ‘guilty’ – but in a pleasant way. We want them to encounter the neighbourhood in a playful manner and keep hearing about, like in the media, then hopefully something will stick” (Interview July 2009). However, they also hoped the media would act as autonomous pressure cooker on the government. They always invited the press to attend their events. “We didn’t miss a single opportunity to talk to radio and television, so people knew something was up in Zoqaq al-Blat” (Interview October 2009). I will explain a bit further below why they thought it was necessary to exert pressure on (local) government. For now, in terms of the ideological complex of civil society, it suffices to draw attention to the media’s symbolic importance (it’s obviously hard to gauge whether it was practically effective). Yazigi considers this use of the media as a public sort of lobbying technique: getting government officials and media in the same place, getting the media to apply pressure “from the
“bottom-up”, which is “a kind of lobbying that is quite weak in Lebanon” (Interview July 2009). So, for example, Yazigi recalled that at the end of the EU Archimedes project, they presented the results of their study and called on the government officials who were present to act on their recommendations, “in front of the media”, that they had made sure to invite as well.

The project’s relation to Lebanese ‘society’ was therefore double. On the one hand, the organizers sought to marshal allies in what is basically some version of madani society: informed citizens who care about the public good, who call on the state to live up to its representative responsibilities; as well as the media, who play an important part in informing citizens as well, and, in doing so, exert pressure on government. On the other hand, it addressed the institutions that, in the Lebanese civil society imagination of things, would be part of ahli society. They were identified as conservative actors, stuck in their own world and difficult to approach. Still, they were not only seen as inherent adversaries or obstacles, but also as possible sources of the solution. At least some might yet play a progressive role. (Not all though – there was much deep-seated doubt about the political parties. Both Yazigi and Barakat expressed their worries about how they would react to their initiative, and we have seen in the Introduction.) As to the ordinary residents of the neighbourhood, who have thus far shone by their absence, they were in fact “another chapter”, in Yazigi’s words, to commence only if the current one is successfully written.

Ultimately though, society would have to act upon the state as well, crucial in the protection of national heritage. That state is conceived of as an organ that has to be convinced by rational arguments and coaxed into action through public (media) pressure. The importance of making the right argument fits into a certain Enlightenment ideal (cf. Flyvbjerg 1998) of the democratic state that is an important ideological support for civil society, in general and in Lebanon especially. This conception shows in Yazigi’s discourse in various ways. For instance, while the Archimedes study had taught him the local authorities such as the municipality do in

153 A comparison with LADE’s approach to the state may provide depth to this perspective. Nayla played with the notion of ‘political’ in the following way: “We are an organization on political issues, let’s say, I mean the electoral law itself is a highly political issue – but we do perceive it in a different way. We do not care about who will win or lose in the elections – but we do care about the process to be fair, transparent; we do care also about an electoral law that brings dynamics for change. If the people want to change, [our new] electoral law will give them that chance but not the current one, which forbids any real change in power.” (Interview date May 2009; my emphasis) This also resonates with Yes to Dialogue’s introduction to the post-election special with Baroud. Doing politics in a non-political way.
fact possess competencies that allow them to intervene in the urban process productively, the municipality doesn’t apply them because it “lacks a vision”. (Granted, he also said it lacked desire and courage, which would point to an acknowledgment of ‘political’ dimensions, but that still leaves intact the idea that rational action is primary in state operations, only to be polluted by politics and self-interest.) Similarly, when a new municipal council was installed after the 2010 spring elections, Majal et al. wanted to convene a meeting with them to explain why the ‘parking and mobility’ agenda of the new council was mistaken in its ‘vision’ (of how the city could be made to work). Also, tropes like initially ‘not believing in it’ or ‘doubting it could work’ abounded in how Yazigi’s descriptions of his encounters with state and civil society, and indicate a cognitivist qualification of the problem – it was a matter of a correct perception of problems and solutions. In the same vein, he recounted how he took the municipal council – located at the edge of Zoqaq al-Blat – out for a tour in the neighbourhood, because they didn’t actually know it. One presumes he did so in the assumption that proper knowledge would change council members’ minds and positions. And in July 2009, that assumption seemed vindicated.

Even the municipality, we’ve been trying to get through to them for a long time, without success. Now, a couple of days ago, suddenly someone whom we think will be the next president of the municipal council calls me, [saying] ‘Serge, you really stuck it out, we have to see each other once this is over, to see what we can do for the other neighbourhoods. Maybe expropriating a few buildings [to repurpose them for public ends] might not be enough’. This is the first time we’re starting to talk vision, logics, strategies, etc.. We don’t know what’s going to happen. It’s probably also with a political goal in mind, like in every municipality – I mean, maybe it’ll go in his new political program. If they use us, that’s fine with me, as long as we get to do what we need to.

Finally, they seemed to have been able to move the state to discuss “vision, logics and strategies” – the way it was supposed to have operated all this time. Admittedly, the latter part of the quote also shows it’s not entirely an idealization of the state as a rational body, even as it does not change the basic mechanism of his analysis: if the people express their desire clearly, the state might just follow. A similar ‘political’ analysis holds for his assessment that, now that they’ve gotten public attention, things are moving in the right direction, because a few members of the
council are able to compete for points on this issue. In this kind of analysis, members of state still respond to the public will and would do so on the basis of rational policy considerations.

All in all, Yazigi presented an optimistic discourse. Most likely, the presentation of his version of events to me and other audiences were part of the campaign. He did hint at things happening behind the scenes that he probably had certain reservations about, but he didn’t share them with me or in public performances. However, rather than being a personal, idiosyncratic trait, this is symptomatic for Lebanese civil society – because ‘it’ happens ‘in public’, certain features of political processes retreat to the background. That is a crucial point I belabour in the final section below. The next chapter meanwhile will pick up on and play with this tension between the ideological core of the civil society, found functionally and logically ‘in public’, and the pragmatic strategies by civil society members, behind the scenes.

‘Civil society’: cosmopolitan secularism and non-political politics

What then is ‘civil society’? It is quite close in political ideology to the secular beliefs of Hansen’s (2013) Indian middle classes. The dreams are similar, even if there are differences that arise out of the respective (post-colonial) histories. One striking similarity is the distinction between the cultural and social domains and ‘politics’ (one that resonates undoubt- edly in many more countries). What the distinction means differs between these two cases, but what is at stake is the same: to avoid the messy realities of politics. In India, the ‘cultural’ is essentially what is the confession in Lebanon. (Many people in civil society would agree that it should be kept out of politics, but that means something different in Lebanon. More on that further down.) The ‘cultural’ for civil society in Lebanon refers to something akin to high culture – related to the arts and to intellectual life (think of film or heritage). It presents a domain from which to think about the Lebanese nation-state and from which to engage both nation and state. When people in ‘civil society’ talk about the ‘social’ (“social things”), meanwhile, instead of the life of the religious community, they mean the life of the oecumene. It is what one might call ‘national cosmopolitanism’, which consists first and foremost of professing and practicing tolerance towards other sects, but secondarily, though ideally, also of being versed in the (idealized) ways of the Western world. This national cosmopolitanism is what Indians called secularism. Being ‘secular’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ is an ideal for individuals to embody (especially public figures in the first case; especially ordinary citizens in the second); but it is accompanied by an ideal for the state. Perhaps that ideal
may be called ‘technocratic’, in that it puts its faith in proper procedures, in expert bureaucrats who impartially carry out regulations (cf. Hansen 2013: 209). Hansen (with Yadav) discusses the example of the Electoral Commission and the deployment of a new technology to limit fraud (ibid: 224); in Lebanon, the ‘za‘im of civil society’, PM Baroud, might serve as an equivalent example, as the true Lebanese bureaucrat on which many had pinned their hopes for progress.

The distinction also leads to a particular conception of the ‘struggle’. The commitment to the public good – as good ‘cosmopolitan’ / ‘secular’ citizens – implies a certain engagement with the state: the state needs to be called to its public task by such citizens. In so far as a member of “civil society” engages in what you would ordinarily call “politics”, therefore, it is a general sort of battle, not a partisan one: a battle to enhance transparency, democratic governance and to protect the public good and the idea of the (cosmopolitan) nation. To do otherwise would mean getting bogged down in status quo “politics”, the dirty politics of those serving their own (personal or communal) purposes. Not only is that fight a dirty one, it risks exacerbating the problem that civil society members precisely hope to overcome (or at least steer clear from): the communal differences and divergences that threaten to undermine the very country they’re trying to build up.

This could also account for the discursive practice of not ‘getting political’. As we have seen, most of these organization police ‘talking politics’, that is, discussing the political scene in Lebanon in (personal) detail. While it is customary to talk about the (faults of) the Lebanese system, one is not supposed to mention actual political actors that make use of this system. One can think of still other reasons why the avoidance of (‘messy’ or ‘dirty’ politics) would occur. The funding structures of NGOs would be one. Most of the NGOs (and certainly those discussed in this chapter) are supported by foreign donors. Few of these donors have an overtly politicized outlook themselves and even if they (or their individual members) did, supporting local organizations that are tied to events that stir up certain trouble is hazardous to the continuity of their operations in Lebanon. They are therefore unlikely to encourage (i.e., fund) overtly political project proposals. Also, in part through these funding structures, the type of non-political or depoliticizing language and sociological imagination that characterizes global civil society is bound to have some sort of influence on how local participants in ‘civil society’ perceive and frame their challenges (e.g., as documented in Ferguson 1994). Then there are local language ideologies tied to the history of war: the widely accepted idea that the social peace in Lebanon is extremely fragile and will tear if people
get up close and personal (i.e., if people get specific). While these are all relevant reasons, one still has to wonder why such ideas would translate into discursive practices in any given situation.

Another part of the answer must be found in the resolutely public nature of ‘civil society’. It ‘lives’ primarily in public. In part, this has to do with the fact ‘civil society’ is a space for (young) people from which to imagine a different Lebanon, but also practice or rehearse it in a more visceral way. The intensity of the political desires should not be underestimated – nor should the gravitas of Lebanon’s problems (economic, social, political) in people’s eyes be taken too lightly. This publicness, in which people can live this other Lebanon, is key to understanding ‘civil society’. The Zoqaq al-Blat project is iconic of civil society in this respect. With its various events, it created a similar – albeit temporary – space-time of events, talks, and exhibitions that allowed people to reflect, sometimes passively, sometimes by participation, on the nature of Lebanese society and its challenges. That is in fact but a microcosm of what civil society is at large. It consists of sites collectively created and re-created by a partially networked assemblage of NGOs, film screenings, debates, cafés, and festivals, which share audiences (constituencies, one is tempted to say, with a wink to the sociological imagination of Lebanese “civil society”), dreams and goals, and crucially, discursive practices.

These practices therefore depend crucially on what we might call the ecological conditions of enunciation. The complex of initiatives and organizations build up to a broad range of events that invite some form of public reflexivity. The fact that these events share audiences creates a certain familiarity among attendees, as well as a degree of co-constitution and intertextuality among these events. This consistency is one of the conditions of possibility for ‘civil society’ – as a way of understanding and debating Lebanon – to exist. It’s the horizon of enunciation, if you will, freely after Michael Warner’s (2005) studies of el público. Despite the familiarity that people have with each other, though, there are always strangers on this horizon of enunciation. Hence these events are still explicitly public engagements, that is, open-ended in their address and uncertain of their reception. That strengthens an ideological notion that addressing the public is what being civil is all about, i.e. being able to dialogue and maintain cohesion despite differences. It is also a favourable ‘ecological’ condition for the relevance of the reasons mentioned above: the caution against incendiary language, or the general depoliticizing tendency in the sociological imagination of (the developmental, NGO type of) civil society (in as far as one can presume it has trickled into Lebanese circles).
Conclusion Let me bring this characterization of civil society more explicitly into the fold of this thesis. How does the sectarian system figure into the imagination of who people ‘in’ civil society think they are? As we’ve seen, their conceptualization of that system is two-fold: it is treated as a legal system based on the recognition and mediation of confessional communities. The electoral system is the prime example of that legal system. It is also seen as a cultural ‘system’, if you will, in which confessional differences have been hardened into boundaries and where mistrust results in latent tensions that may quickly escalate. Somewhere in between there is a category of politicians that exploit these tensions and abuse the weaknesses of the politico-legal system to further their own personal or sectarian interests. That combo constitutes the political challenge to members of civil society. The task is to reduce the hold of conservative or even reactionary powers-that-be over society by creating a transparent and rational state that condition political leaders to place the public good central in the state’s operations.

The vocabulary people deploy to formulate that challenge draws upon civil society’s (global) imagination of the liberal democratic state as well as older Lebanese consociational and cosmopolitan traditions. ‘Civil society’ here functions as a moral community, as a set of discursive repertoires that in their exercise offer a moral horizon against which one can see how society could be organized. It can also exhibit what the modern citizen should stand for. It is crucial to note that people in civil society call upon each other to be “citizens”. It is a subject position that cannot be realized in the current Lebanese society (it is impossible to be a full citizen in a confessional system), but embodying it in civil society is the condition of possibility for its realization (in a future secular legal order).

These points clearly constitute differences with this world of Khandaq. Most evident is the position vis-à-vis sectarianism. Whereas people in civil society situate themselves outside of the sectarian system, and occupy the position of the neutral citizen (see picture on next page), people in Khandaq are always part of that sectarian system, in the sense that sectarian identification is obvious and foundational, and that they have a relation to ‘their’ (confessional) party. This is the fundamental difference, ultimately, between these two worlds. However, as we’ve seen, that people ‘foot’ themselves within the sectarian landscape does not imply they are wholly encapsulated by it. They draw on an alternative vocabulary, of “the people” and “ordinary men”, to critically evaluate goings-on in sectarian Lebanon. The kind of critical evaluations are different though. Abu Zalem’s draws on historical Arab Nationalism to formulate his critique of secularism. (Granted, his is a far more pronounced version of
Arab Nationalism is a controversial movement in Lebanese history that many in civil society would relegate to political ‘ideology’. Conversely, someone like Abu Zalem is disparaging about the “secularism” of civil society, which is more akin to the French laïcité (“Laique Pride” is actually an annually recurring march advocating secularism in Lebanon, organized by various ‘activists’), seeing it as a part of the imposition of western powers and their geopolitical agendas, and probably as something that reeks of anti-religiousness. The more fundamental difference, though, is that statements like Abu Zalem’s occur side-by-side with firm discursive implantations of roots in the confessional universe (of the Shia universe, in this particular case).

That implantation also implies a different relation to ‘being political’ or ‘politics’. If one is already part of the sectarian world, one cannot be contaminated by it. One can see the very ‘political’ nature of a speech like Abu Zalem’s in that light (it is quite specific in the names it names, even to the point Abu Zalem deemed it strategically wise to shut himself up, as he was disqualifying people who were allies to his own party). Yet one shouldn’t overestimate such an ideational grounding of discursive practice – the materiality of the discursive context primes. We can explain the differences in ways of talking in part in reference to the same ecological criteria. Co-present talk in Khandaq arises out of daily or otherwise frequent meetings in non-exclusive but relatively bounded groups.
Conversations are more or less continuous (and repetitive), much like in civil society, but more strongly and fluidly so. The effect is to create a kind of public intimacy. That intimacy cancels out the widely accepted norm that to ‘talk politics’ or to ‘get into names’ is not done or dangerous, as one is better able to place the audience and how they might receive statements. My presumption is that the very same people would adhere, at least to a certain degree, to that public norm outside of their neighbourhood associations (note that for example Abu Zalem’s Arab Nationalism speech was performed in the presence of visitors from another neighbourhood). The materiality of the speech context decisively mediates genres of public speech.

All this should not obscure some important convergences though between the two styles of imagination. If we reconsider Abu Zalem’s lament at the state of Arab Nationalism today, his version of secularism actually bears a striking parallel to civil society’s national cosmopolitanism. Both decry the out-of-bounds, ‘passionate’ sectarianism, the kind that leads to violence. On a more fundamental level, however, both identify a comparable, vital problem with the state as well: it does not act responsively and responsibly towards its citizens. Marked differences only subsequently arise in the ways of conceiving this problem, as well as its solutions. Civil society folks (“citizens”) have an ideal of the rights procedures (rational bureaucracy, transparency, etc.), whereas members of the people (“ordinary men”) desire “fairness”, that it “does right by” them. The latter demand reticence by political leaders, whereas the first believe only in the disciplining power of proper regulation. Still, the fact that the two do not in fact diverge as much as one might think having read this chapter and the previous one should give reason to pause. In fact, that pause should provide the springing board to Chapter 6, in which I caution against highlighting and hypostasizing these differences into a dichotomous understanding of citizenship in the postcolonial world.