



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

MERCHANTS AND MEMORY:  
REMEMBERING THE OLD BEIRUT SOUQS

by

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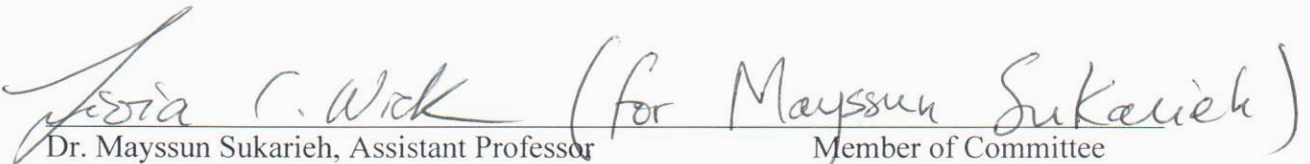
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Directly after the end of the civil war in 1990, a massive project for the reconstruction of the Beirut Central District was launched by Rafic Hariri and was to be carried out by the private real estate company Solidere. This project was controversial as it required handing over of the city center's reconstruction – typically a state task - to a private company. It required the appropriation of all private property in the area to Solidere. Property Rights Holders, those who owned property in the city center, were forced to give up their property in return for shares in the company or compensation. This project spurred debate about how the reconstruction should take place, who should be involved and what kind of city was to be built, with some supporting Solidere and many others opposing it. The reconstruction of the city center greatly altered the way in which people used and identified with the urban space, and the meaning that the city center once held for Lebanese. By looking at the life story of Beirut merchant who grew up and worked in the old Beirut souqs, this thesis will examine the ways in which the past is remembered after the experience of personal loss. In particular, how the displaced merchant reconciles his memory of his shops and life in the downtown area with their experience of displacement from the war and then the reconstruction of the city center

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“I lived in Abu Dhabi for 18 years, I came back to Beirut and I saw that the store was still there. I opened up the doors, I started crying, I was wiping the floor *ya amo* [uncle] with the tears from my eyes, I swear to God almighty. The representative (given the power of attorney by the owner) of the building was named George Kassab, I was still paying him what money I owed him, he told me that the building did not fall under the Solidere plan. It's not part of it. That's good, I thought. I went to the Solidere Company, they gave me a document stating that the building is not part of their plan. They told me it wasn't part of Solidere. I went to the Gulf and I liquidated my stores. I have a son of mine, he is a pharmacist, he got a degree in London when my financial situation was good. I told him, my son, I have two stores for you on the *Burj*, a store for you and a store for me and for your brothers, we're all the same, what's mine is yours. He left the company this poor boy. He had a good salary. He left the company in Abu Dhabi, a pharmaceutical company, and he came to Beirut. We got here and were surprised, there was no building. Who had brought the building down? Oger Liban they told us. *Ya haram* [what a tragedy], what Oger Liban did to all the old merchant souqs. They used to bring down the buildings and throw them in the ocean, and the ocean took them away.” – Omar Lababidi.

This is the story of Omar Abdallah Lababidi, and his story is the symbolic story of the old Beirut Souqs. Omar Lababidi is an 81-year-old merchant, who not only owned shops in the old Beirut Souqs, but whose family also lived there, making the city center both his home and workplace. Omar's father had a *pension* or guesthouse, in the city centre, and their home was situated in the floor above the guesthouse. Omar grew up in that guesthouse until he was 24 years old, around 1959, when he got married. However, Omar's life continued in the old souqs where he had started working as a young teenager, selling goods on a *kasheh* (a wooden tray held by cloth and hung around the neck) around his neck, slowly working his way to having a shop of his own, the first of which was in Souq Abu Nasser in 1950, and the last of which was on Martyr's Square

in 1974. With the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in April 1975, Omar closed up his then newly renovated shop on Martyr's Square, and left with his wife and three children (later four) to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. When Omar came back from Abu Dhabi to Beirut at the end of the war in 1993, he found, like most other merchants, that he had lost all his properties, including the guesthouse he had inherited from his father as a result of the Solidere reconstruction project. Though one life story cannot be generalizable, Omar's story represents the essence of what it meant to be a Beirut, what it meant to have one's whole life connected to one place and the drastic consequences displacement had on people. As such, Omar Lababidi is the main narrator of this thesis, and through his memories and experiences, the story of the Beirut City Center, and of hundreds of displaced merchants can be told.

Omar and many other merchants that I spoke to, constantly refer to the reconstruction project of Solidere as a loss of heritage and a destruction of the city centre. The demolition and reconstruction of the 'heart of Beirut' after the Lebanese civil war has been the cause of emotional and material suffering for many people. Those who had shops in the old souqs, referred to as property rights holders (rights holders), are the people that were forced by the reconstruction project to give up their claims to the shops. The loss of the city, of the social fabric, and of their livelihoods is the starting point of this project; a time from which people can begin to remember and narrate their memories of their city and their lives. The main questions I aim to explore are; how do merchants remember the pre-civil war city center? What role does displacement play in the remembering, or reimagining of the old souqs? What role can memory play in telling the history of a particular space? In the following sections I will talk about Beirut as a commercial hub, focusing on the old souqs of the city center before the Lebanese

Civil War, and following that I will touch on the effects of the civil war on the city center, and consequently the reconstruction project, Solidere, that was created to handle the reconstruction of the city center after the war. The gradual creation and the phases of the reconstruction project will be discussed in detail. I will then discuss my research methodology and provide an overview of the literature and framework for the thesis.

### **Beirut as an Economic Center**

The laissez faire economy Lebanon adopted after independence in 1943, unlike its Arab neighbors, and the loss of Haifa in 1948 as an important port, led Beirut to become a key city in the region, welcoming communities from all over the Arab world, such as Palestinians, Syrians and Iraqis among others. The flow of capital into the country boosted the economy, particularly the banking sector. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the local banking sector joined the global banking milieu, placing Beirut as a global financial capital dependent on international trade and services. Another major aspect of Beirut and Lebanon in general was the tourism sector that flourished and attracted international visitors to the country. The boost in tourism also led to the development of other suburbs in Beirut, such as the Hamra area, which is adjacent to the city center. Lebanon became well known - especially by its Arab neighbors - as a summer retreat, and therefore many from the Arab countries invested in real estate in the country (Kassab 1997, Sawalha 2010).

Through these economic developments, the city center became a particularly significant area in modern Lebanon's history, serving as the commercial, financial, social, and governmental hub of the country especially during the 1950s and 60s that are

now referred to as the “golden age” of Lebanon (Sawalha 2010). Within it were located the souqs (market places) where people could buy anything from thread and needle to food to jewelry. The main financial banking district was also located in the city center. In addition there were hotels, motels, residential areas, social areas such as restaurants, theatres and cinemas and the transport hub of the country (Makdisi 1997). In many ways, the pre civil war city center represents a microcosm of what is imagined as an ideal Lebanon; a space encouraging economic prosperity, diverse social activity, and a meeting point, it is said, where people of all classes and religious backgrounds could interact. To many who experienced the area before the civil war, it was seen as a space that promoted all that was ideal in the country, and that is why when the civil war devastated the area it was seen as a destruction not just of the center, but of the whole country.

The city centre, or the *Balad*, as it is commonly referred to, is an area that is 1,100,000 square meters in size. It is bordered by Martyr’s Square on one side, and Debbas Place (over which the highway connecting Ras Beirut and Achrafieh was built), and the port area leading to the St. George Hotel before Ain el Mreisseh. The center included office buildings, residences, restaurants and places of entertainment such as theatres, and the commercial souqs. The majority of the souqs were located behind Martyr’s square, forming a web of specialized souqs, some for jewelry (the Gold Souq), some for food (fish, meat, vegetables and fruit souqs respectively), and others for clothing (Souq el-Tawileh, Souq Ayass), and fabrics (Souq el-W’iyeh), to name the most well known. In the *Balad*, as of 1974, there were 1,630 private properties and 39,000 rights holders, whose businesses accounted for 70,000 employees. Owners of commercial stores numbered 10,600. At the close of the civil war, rights holders,

because of inheritance, numbered 63,000. Most merchants who had shops were not the owners of the property, but rentees, in the system known as *khliw*, an informal agreement between renters and owners, through which the rentee secured the space he rented as a form of ownership, and could only be removed from it through compensation. In this way, the rights of the rentees were protected, and the shops they had resembled a form of ownership (Sawalha 2010). In this thesis I will refer to the area as the *Balad*, or city centre, or old Beirut Souqs, depending on the specific area I am referring to. I have chosen to refer to it with those names in contrast to the naming of it as the Beirut Central District (BCD) which is used by Solidere.

The fifteen-year civil war between 1975 and 1990 left Lebanon devastated. The city of Beirut and particularly its center were destroyed. The Green line, an official military boundary which later on became the demarcation line of the city, dividing it into the Christian east and the Muslim west, ran right through the central district and essentially made it a no-man's-land (Calame and Charlesworth 2009). Consequently, people in the east rarely, if ever, ventured to the west and vice versa. The city center itself was completely emptied of people and overrun by militias. During the war, the state was a non-functioning entity and the administration of everyday life was taken over by the different militias in various areas. While fighting didn't actually take place within the souqs, the entire place was heavily affected as the exchange of fire took place in the areas immediately bordering the old souqs, with Martyr's Square as the middle ground between the Phalangists and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), in addition to the Battle of the Hotels (1975-77) which took place in the hotel district in Minet el Hosn. It was a long and consistent exchange of fire that served to keep the area a no-mans-land. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1976, the old souqs of Beirut were burned to

the ground (Kassir 2010; Davie 2008) As such, from the onset of the war, the old souqs and the city center in general became inaccessible to the shopkeepers.

During the first two years of the war (1975-76) merchants and other businesses were gradually forced to leave their shops, many relocating first in their homes, before gradually setting up shops and offices in different areas of Beirut (Rights Holders Documents). Most shopkeepers I spoke to relocated their shops in different areas of the city, usually close to the areas that they were living in. They maintained the same form of business, Omar Lababidi for instance continued in the trade of men's clothing, similarly, others relocated and reopened in the same line of business. However the material and social loss of the center could never be replicated or replaced. During one period in 1977 when there was a short ceasefire, some shopkeepers attempted to go back and reopen their shops, some found their places intact, others found their shops to have been looted or destroyed. The period was short-lived however, and soon after the fighting resumed, and until the end of the war in 1990, the city center became completely off limits to the merchants.

It is frequently said that the heavy fighting and shelling of the downtown that took place in the city center between the militias was coordinated between Hariri and the militias. It is claimed that the militias were armed and paid to keep the fighting going and additionally were told to target specific buildings in the area so as to maximize the damage caused. Other reports also state that when demolishing buildings, the company used larger than necessary amounts of dynamite that inevitably destroyed surrounding buildings that were in good condition and could have otherwise been saved (Makdisi 1997). Therefore, while Solidere portrayed itself as picking up the pieces after the war was over, in truth, it was responsible for a large part of the destruction that took

place after the war (Makdisi 1997, Sawalha 2010, Yahya 2007). While destroying many sites, Solidere selectively preserved others such as the Place de L'Etoile from the French mandate period over other more national sites (Haugbolle 2010).

It is estimated that the war left around 200,000 dead and 300,000 injured, over 700,000 displaced persons, and 17,000 missing persons (Yahya 2007, Calame and Charlesworth 2009). The civil war officially ended in 1991 with the signing of the Taif Accords. The state however, remained weak and was subjected to interference from political parties, militias and warlords. After the war came to an end, most of the inhabitants and shop owners of the central district were unable to go back to their properties because they were damaged or inaccessible (Sawalha 2010), and for many others, they were directly prohibited from going to their properties.

“Everybody was waiting to go back, waiting for the war to end to go back to their shops, their homes, their buildings. They wanted to see how they could get in. When we came in there were policemen saying that “you will find mines, no one can enter.” Then they said the buildings were dangerous.

They made it happen... they passed that law in parliament... it happened really fast [sigh].” – Leila Dimashqiyeh (Rights Holder).

“The minister of interior, who was Sami [Sami el Khatib] [long pause] (chuckles) I forgot his name, anyway that person was pro-Syrian, the ministry of interior at the time... colonel I think... something, Sami something... and he was friendly with Hariri and we know that somehow [pause] they told the forces on the ground, whether Lebanese or Syrian, to not allow anybody to wander in the area, and it was difficult to wander in the downtown... [pause] although at the outskirts of downtown it was possible, I remember ... near our place... I was able to move and pick one grenade, it was still on the ... on the land [pause] but most importantly [pause] the government didn't allow people who wanted to restore their place... didn't allow them to do so. I know for example Mrs. Naila Bustros, who is our vice president, who had an important building at Souq el-Tawileh, wanted to restore and has put a demand at the Beirut municipality, at the Governor, and she was refused, she was told that the area was now under study, there is a new project, everything is going to

change, we cannot allow anybody to restore because buildings are going to be demolished so...” – Samir Haddad (Rights Holder).

“We had a building, an old Khan in Souq el-Tawileh. It was built in 1700, something like this... and it had traders and shops. You enter through the main entrance and there was an inner court and a fountain, and you go up the stairs and you enter into the shops and offices, it was three floors with a tiled a roof. During the civil war, the tiles fell in. In 1988, or 87, Rafic Hariri had a company called Oger, and he said I will clean up for free, there was so much rubble on the ground, in the middle of the streets, and trees had grown in the middle of the streets, so he said I would clean it for you. He knew he wanted to exercise his control over the area. And then he started to say, “these buildings are dangerous to the public” – they were not dangerous at all, they used to get wrecking balls to bring down the buildings because they were so strong. So this is how they brought down our building and all the other buildings in Beirut. I remember one thing, when they told us that it was for a real estate company, I went down [to the centre] in the night with our lawyer, and we crept between the streets with a hand lamp in a small pickup, and we dismantled the fountain, we dismantled it and I got it here and placed it in the garden here. What else could I get with me, I couldn’t take anything from the building.” Hala Sursoq – Rights Holder.

The story of the reconstruction of the city center happened quickly and quietly, leaving no room for discussion, no room for contestation and creating much confusion. The country had only recently come out of the civil war, and after the few months it took for people to assure themselves that there was a permanent peace, their property had already been taken. As people slowly began to make their to city center to see their homes or shops, they found the center had been closed off, because of the excuse that there were landmines and grenades, and so it would be unsafe for people to wander in the streets of the city. However, the main peripheral roads were open but many people still couldn’t get to their shops located in the narrower streets and souqs. Following that, the city was closed off because it was ‘under study,’ and legally, any land that is ‘under study’ can be barred off from people for that period of time. For many people, the beginning of the civil war would end up being the last time they saw their property.



Omar in particular, came back to Beirut from Abu Dhabi because he was told that the building in which his shop was located did not fall under the jurisdiction of Solidere, that it would not be demolished (see quote page 2), however, he came to find to the building gone.

The reconstruction project began directly with the end of the war, and it was launched by Rafic Hariri, who claimed that it was a necessity in the social and economic rehabilitation of ‘the heart of Beirut’ (Sawalha 2010, Yahya 2007, Becherer 2005, Schmid 2006). Hariri described the project as, “[a] transformation of [Beirut Central District] into a modern financial and commercial center [and] as symbolizing the rebirth of the country and the determination of the Lebanese to rebuild their capital” (quote in Yahya 2007: 245). Since its inception, the reconstruction project, which was carried out by the real estate company Solidere<sup>1</sup>, which was directed by Hariri and began formally functioning in 1994, has spurred much debate as it involved handing over massive city structural changes, which is usually considered a state task, to the hands of a private company (Makdisi 1997). In order to transfer authority from the city to Solidere, a number of legislative moves had to be carried out. Primarily this involved the creation of Law No. 117<sup>2</sup>, passed in December 1991, which gave the municipal administration the ability to create companies and give the rights to implement urban plans and to promote, market, and sell property to private developers. This allowed Solidere to appropriate all the private property in the downtown area. In return, rights holders were given shares in the company that were supposed to be equivalent to the estimated worth

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<sup>1</sup> Solidere is an acronym for the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of the Beirut City Central.

<sup>2</sup> The law that was passed was drafted by Bahij Tabara, Hariri’s consultant at the time. In addition when the Constitutional Council was formed 19 months after the passing of this law, it was not allowed to debate any laws that were passed before the creation of this council (Association of Property Rights Holders Committee).

of their property (Makdisi 1997). A private committee was created that was responsible for setting the prices of the properties, and the decisions of this committee were final and not subject to appeal in the courts.<sup>3</sup> Rights holders had no choice in what happened to their property.

According to different reports, at the end of the civil war, though much of the center was damaged from the fighting, many buildings and areas remained in tact, and many were only in need of rehabilitation (Rights Holders documents; Makdisi 1997). Solidere however, once taking control over the area, began the demolition of all buildings and souqs, except places of worship and 190 buildings that were deemed as historic buildings. Owners of the buildings and concerned parties were quick to challenge Solidere on the destruction of most buildings, and it is through their action that the number of “historic buildings” was increased from 190 to 265 buildings. In addition, the owners of these historic buildings were allowed to use the buildings, but under very specific conditions, and in addition, shop owners, or rentees, were not allowed to redeem their shops unless the owner of the whole property was able to take it back. As a result of these difficult conditions, on 146 rights holders were able to get back their preserved buildings. As for the rest of the city center, even though most of it was in good condition or able to be renovated, it was destroyed. Some of the souqs that were completely destroyed include, the Gold Souq, Souq Abu Nasr. Souq Ayass, Souq el-Tawileh, and Souq al-Jamil. Land was priced by Solidere through committees at 1,532 US Dollars per square meter whereas the actual price at the time was 2,500 – 4,000 US Dollars per square meter.

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<sup>3</sup> This breaks the Lebanese property ownership law no. 58/91 that states that a Rights Holder has a right to appeal to judges on the verdicts of a committee (Rights Holders Committee Documents).

During this time an association, known as the Association of Property Rights Holders, was formed to gather property holders and to challenge and delegitimize the reconstruction project. Solidere, in its vision, was to build a city that would reflect the global vision of Beirut that Rafic Hariri sought to project. This was primarily reflected in Solidere's motto: "Beirut - Ancient City for the Future". Beirut as a global city was to be decorated with traces from its historic past, in an attempt to merge the future with the past, while at the same time modeling it according to global capitalist cities such as New York or Hong Kong. (Kassab 1997, Schmid 2006). In opposition to this, property owners argue that by envisioning Beirut a global city, Solidere has completely changed the physical and social identity of the space and excluded the majority of the Lebanese population. The new city center houses high-end designer brands and international clothing chains as well as high-end restaurants and bars. It has become a space that caters almost exclusively to the upper class in its services, and even in its "public" areas, there is little, if any, room for leisure that is free. The center is a heavily militarized zone, with security personnel being a constant presence, and in some areas, simply taking a photograph is prohibited.

In order to promote the project, Solidere, as mentioned, used the city's rich archaeological and social history as a tool in a campaign to market the company's work as part of a national rehabilitation project concerned with preserving history and heritage for the Lebanese. Solidere did so by producing information booklets, calendars, and maps that played on these factors. In one map produced by Solidere and named, *Beirut Central District: the paths of history* (Solidere Map 1995), Solidere presents a two sided map of the city centre, one side focusing on the different reconstruction zones, the other showcasing different images of archaeological treasures connected to

the different zones of the city centre, presenting them in a way so as to show Solidere's commitment to heritage preservation. Indeed it is stated on the map, "by sponsoring and financing most archaeological fieldwork, Solidere hopes to ensure that the reconstruction of the Beirut Central District integrates the results of the archaeological fieldwork and research, preserving the city's identity and creating meaningful new space where past and future meet." They go on to state, "Visit the Beirut Central District and discover why we call Beirut "the ancient city for the future"" (Solidere Map 1995).

Though Solidere is a private company, it sought to promote itself as a public force, working together with Lebanese and rights holders to "rejuvenate" the centre, and to restore it to its past glory. The company described itself as being "an association of property rights holders, and investors, whose contributions make possible the financing and executing of the required infrastructure allowing for the project to move forward" (Solidere 1995: 4) In doing so Solidere attempts to portray rights holders as an integral part of the rebuilding process, an image drastically different to the reality of the project and the actual control of power in the planning and execution of the reconstruction process.

Moreover, Solidere heavily invested in using "memory" as a way to legitimize the reconstruction project. In the early 1990s, it launched "The Reconstruction of the Souks of Beirut: an International Ideas Competition" open to the public to bring together ideas for the reconstruction of the old souqs. As part of this, a series of books were published by Solidere that were meant to aid participants in presenting their ideas, but also served as a way to solidify Solidere's authority over the city centre, and more so over the memory of the space as well. The books include the *Visual Survey Kit*, the *Conditions and Program Kit*, and *The Souks in their Memories* (Solidere 1994). Each

book serves a different purpose, one to outline the guidelines and rules of the competition, one that does a survey of the area of the competition, and of particular relevance is the one that compiles people's memories of the old souqs in "an attempt to read into the public's collective memories of the souks, and understand their feelings and aspirations towards the new ones to be constructed" (Solidere 1994). In addition to this a book was also published, aptly named "Beirut Reborn" (Gavin and Maluf 1996), that also heavily focuses on the work of Solidere as one of national preservation, and one that aims to bring back the glory of the center as a commercial and social hub. In all these books and booklets, the community of merchants that made up the souks is mentioned, and the reconstruction project as the mechanism by which the life can be restored to the city center the meeting place for all Lebanese. It is an ironic attempt by the company to figure itself as the preserver and promoter of national memory, in a space that symbolizes the complete destruction of memory through the reconstruction project.

### **Phases of the Reconstruction Plan**

The reconstruction of the city center had been a priority since the civil war had began. Plans for the reconstruction of the central Beirut district began in the late 1970s, following the first war years of 1975-76. During a lull in fighting in 1977, a combined Lebanese-French plan was commissioned by the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) that aimed at conserving what had still remained of the area, seeking to conserve its social and economic character. This plan encouraged the property owners to come back to the downtown area and participate in the

reconstruction, fixing what they could of their immediate properties, and the state would oversee the larger more damaged areas. The plan however, never materialized as fighting renewed. In 1983, the reconstruction effort was taken over by Oger Liban, a private engineering firm owned by Rafic Hariri, Lebanese billionaire and future prime minister. A plan was commissioned by Dar al-Handasah,<sup>4</sup> an Arab consultancy firm, however, an official plan never materialized, but the demolition of the central area began regardless. It is argued that this was said to be a “cleaning up” of the city and those who were behind it were unknown,<sup>5</sup> and it included the demolition of key parts of the old city such as two of the souqs, Souq Sursoq and Souq al-Nouriyeh (Makdisi 1997). In the case of the second plan for reconstruction, there are conflicting accounts, while some state that there was an official plan for reconstruction in 1986 based on the 1977 plan (Kassab 1997), others state that there was no official plan and as mentioned above, demolition took place during 1983 and then 1986 as fighting had again erupted in 1984<sup>6</sup> (Makdisi 1997).

The Solidere plan for the reconstruction of the Beirut Central District began almost immediately after the end of the civil war. The rebuilding of particularly the central business district was seen as absolutely necessary to the rebuilding and rehabilitation of the country in general. The aim was to return Lebanon to its pre-war glory as the ‘Switzerland of the Middle East’ (Sawalha 2010). The plan for the reconstruction of the BCD was developed, promoted and overseen, by Rafic Hariri. The Hariri plan, differed in many respects to the previous plans for the reconstruction of

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<sup>4</sup> Dar el-Handasah is a firm that Rafic Hariri was very heavily invested in, and this same firm would be the one to draw up the new reconstruction plan following the end of the civil war (Becherer, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> However it is speculated that those behind this “clean up” were the same people behind the current reconstruction project (Makdisi, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> It is alleged that the same actors were behind both demolitions and that there was developing an unauthorized plan for the reconstruction of the city center that resembled the Solidere plan and that called for the destruction of up to 80% of the center (Makdisi 1997).

Beirut. Firstly, it focused on the Beirut Central District as opposed to the whole city. The approach that the project took was not interested in the conservation of the Beirut Central District, but rather the complete reconstruction and renewal of the area. As mentioned by numerous scholars on the topic, it was a tabula rasa approach that aimed to create a completely new and modern central district (Yahya 2007, Kassab 1997, Sawalha 2010, Makdisi 1997, Schmid 2006). Over two-thirds of the remaining buildings were to be completely demolished and in their place would be new high-rise buildings that would reflect the global, modern vision of Beirut that Hariri sought to project. The modern Beirut was to be decorated with traces from its historic past, in an attempt to supposedly merge the future with the past, to pay tribute to the history of the city while at the same time modeling it according to global capitalist cities such as New York or Hong Kong (Schmid 2006, Sawalha 2010).

For the reconstruction plan to take effect, a number of moves had to be carried out to transfer the authority over to Solidere. Even though the plan was being debated among numerous concerned actors and heavily criticized, the government was going ahead and giving the project to Solidere. The argument presented in support of the reconstruction project was that the transfer of authority to a private company was necessary because given the amount of property holders which had risen to over 120,000 by the end of the war, it was impossible for reconstruction to be done individually (Schmid 2006, Kassab 1997). In addition it was argued that the state was weak and in no position to undertake such a large project. In December 1991, Law No. 117<sup>7</sup> was passed which gave the municipal administration the ability to create

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<sup>7</sup> The law that was passed was drafted by Bahij Tabara, Hariri's consultant at the time. In addition when the Constitutional Council was formed 19 months after the passing of this law, it was not allowed to debate any laws that were passed before the creation of this council (Documents of the Association of Property Rights Holders).

companies and give the rights to implement urban plans and to promote, market, and sell property to developers. All the government had to do was to delineate the boundaries and to compensate the companies for the cost of the infrastructure (Salam 1998). In order to carry out the reconstruction, Solidere had to have total control over the entire property in the city center, and to do so, it forcefully took all private property in the area, and in return the property rights holders were given shares in the company that was supposed to be equivalent to the estimated worth of their property. A private committee was created that was responsible for setting the prices of the properties, and the decisions of this committee were final, not subject to appeal in the courts.<sup>8</sup> None of the rights holders had any say in the way the reconstruction process was to be carried out, nor had they any control over the way Solidere would handle and use their previously privately owned properties.

To boost its image, Solidere hosted numerous public events to begin to familiarize people with the new plan and in order to gain investors. Solidere stated that the city center had to be restored as the area where people of different backgrounds mingled and existed harmoniously thereby exploiting nationalist sentiments in order to garner support for the project. The project was to be marketed as one for the Lebanese that preserved their heritage and the nation. The company was to build basic infrastructure, public areas such as gardens, and roads. All this work was to be performed on behalf of the state and at the expense of the state on a budget approved by the state. The company would be exempt from state taxation for 10 years (Kassab 1997, Yahya 2007). The center was promoted as the symbolic heart of Beirut and only through its restoration could the rest of the city and the country at large be recuperated.

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<sup>8</sup> This breaks the Lebanese property ownership law no. 58/91 that states that a Rights Holder has a right to appeal to judges on the verdicts of a committee (Documents of the Association of Property Rights Holders).



However, in reality the reconstruction of the city center was undertaken at the great expense of the rest of the city and suburbs that were in desperate need of rehabilitation. Although Solidere sold itself as preserving the heritage of the city, it was heavily criticized by intellectuals, urban planners, and rights holders among others, for only focusing on the architectural aspects of reconstruction and ignoring the social aspects (Sawalha 2010, Schimd 2006, Davie 2008).

In addition, two neighborhoods, Wadi Abu Jamil, and Saifi were to be restored to their original conditions and used as residential areas. Solidere's motto "Beirut - Ancient City for the Future" embodied this discourse of preservation and rehabilitating not just of the city, but also the social and historic role of the city. The reconstruction plan was built on three models of global cities, the Champs Elysee invoked through the *Burj Square*, the Serail (Government headquarters) invokes Washington and is connected to the financial and banking area, while Manhattan is invoked through an area that is to be constructed from land claimed from the sea. Moreover, religious and historical monuments that were preserved were kept as monuments, symbolizing a time past, and totally disconnected from their immediate surroundings. At the same time, the project tries to hang on to illusions of the past, projecting images and snippets of architectural facades that mimic the older historical parts of the city center (Yahya 2007).

### **Research Question**

By examining this piece of Lebanese history, I seek to explore how people remember their pasts after experiencing personal loss. As my focus will be on the

merchants of the old Beirut Souqs, my specific questions are: *How do traders narrate their shops and lives in the city center before their displacement? And how do they narrate and experience displacement and loss? How does the story of one person serve to illustrate the symbolic experience of a community of people and of a shared space?*

Most people who had shops in the old souqs were forced to leave the area when the war started and weren't allowed to return after the war ended because of the reconstruction project. Some relocated their stores while others had to seek new jobs or open different types of stores in other areas. Most people who worked in the center and had shops have fond memories of their life there, recollecting memories of collective meeting places.

Many remember the cart that used to sell the *Jallab* drink in the center, others remember the different souqs with their particular merchandise or the way people from different religions used to participate in all religious holidays and rituals irrespective of their own religion. An important part of their memory is no doubt connected to their struggle with displacement and the reconstruction project. Many regard their situation of displacement by Solidere as a fact beyond their control but continue to criticize the project. Others play a more active role either personally by publicly telling their story through news agencies or collectively through their membership in the Association of Property Rights Holders.

### **Methods: Oral history, Archival Research, and the Focus on the Story of One**

In order to answer these questions, I conducted research on two separate occasions, the first time in April 2010, and the second time, for this thesis in the spring and summer of 2012, and briefly during February 2014. In addition I relied on

newspaper and archival research. The history and reconstruction project of the BCD has been extensively represented in the local Lebanese newspapers, and has been the subject of numerous architectural and academic works. The topics that have been examined range from the ancient history of the city; to the architectural character, changes and functions of the city; to the archaeological treasures of the city; to the issue of reconstruction after the civil war and the controversy that surrounds the entire reconstruction project. There have been both praising and critical works on the reconstruction project. However, other than the local press, there has been no particular focus on the stories and histories of the people who inhabited and made up this historic center of Beirut and their experience of displacement as a result of the reconstruction project.

The research I began in April 2010, was for an assignment for the graduate course, “Oral History, Migration and Displacement”, with Dr. Rosemary Sayigh at the American University of Beirut. The paper that I wrote for this class developed into the topic of my graduate thesis. I first met Omar Lababidi in April 2010 in one of the streets off Hamra Street, an area adjacent to the Beirut Central District. I knew of him through an aunt who had watched him on a television show, *Al Fasad* or “Corruption”, on *Al Jadeed*, a Lebanese broadcasting network. He had a small shop that specialized in men’s clothing, the same line of trade that he had been practicing last in the city center before the war broke out. A couple of years later, in the spring of 2012, I went to visit Omar, but his shop was closed. I was directed to a nearby building on Hamra Street where his shop was hidden in the second floor of a dark building, without a sign or a name. He told me he could no longer pay the rent of the other store, and so he had to come to this one, which previously he had used as a storehouse for his merchandise. He

sat drinking coffee with friends, and the occasional customer coming in. His story was like many other traders I spoke to, one of constant displacement, and finally being resigned to a place on the outskirts of the centre. Those that had once occupied the center of the city and the country were now dispersed across its margins, struggling, it seemed, to maintain their businesses and lives.

Through my initial meeting with Omar, I began to meet other traders and people who were affected by the Solidere reconstruction. Omar gave me the contact information of two key people in the Association of Property Rights Holders, and one of them in turn was instrumental in giving me information about the reconstruction project, and putting me in touch with numerous other traders who I met with and interviewed about their memories and lives in the old Beirut Souqs and the their experience with Solidere. Between the months of April 2012 to September 2012, I met with and interviewed different traders from the old souqs, whose shops used to be in different souqs of the city centre. I conducted 10 interviews, most of them topical life stories. These traders were now dispersed in different parts of the city, removed from its centre, and the fact of moving from one place to another to find them and talk to them was part of their story of displacement. The trips around Beirut included visits to Hamra, Hay el Sillom, Hadi Nasrallah Boulevard, Mosaitbeh, Barbour, Fasouh, and Sassine. The shops they sat in were almost always empty.

This thesis has maintained the name of its main narrator, Omar Abdallah Lababidi, who comes from a famous Beirut family, and whose life story informs this research project. Omar had asked me even in our initial meetings to “record” his name and to “write everything down” - as his story was his ultimate form of resistance. Omar is a public figure, as he has been vocal about his story on television and in the

newspapers. All other speakers' names have been changed. In writing this thesis I have tried as much as possible to remain as close to the words and meanings of the speakers. By using large quotes, I hope to give the speaker the chance to tell the story himself, taking into consideration the challenges that arise in translation and in analysis.

Specifically this thesis will examine an individual life story, that of Omar Lababidi, who presents an opportunity to examine the ways in which the old Beirut city center or parts of it, such as specific souqs, formed a community and had an identity. The main influence of focusing on the story of one individual is based on Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (1980). In this work, the author presents the life of a Moroccan tile-maker known as Tuhami, following his life story from childhood, through his relationships and his place in the Moroccan society. It is clear that the story is about much more than just Tuhami, and through it Crapanzano examines social rituals and relations in a Moroccan society. In a similar vein, focusing on Omar Lababidi is important as he is symbolic of the old Beirut city center, of Beirutis, and of the major transformations that occurred in the city and to the people of Beirut following the civil war and the Solidere reconstruction project.

For the most part, the stories I have gathered were narrated by the speakers on more than one occasion of meeting, and took the form of a topical life story. This involves the use of guiding themes or probes rather than interview questions, as I felt that an interview would restrict the responses that I got from the speaker. My interest was not only in getting certain information from the speaker, but more importantly in letting the speaker construct his own story and choose the memories that he felt were important to share, and to examine the ways in which the speaker constructed his memory and the sequence of events. I found that with this topic, the speaker had only to be asked a

simple question to which the response would be very long and by which one story would begin to trigger memories of another and another. It was evident that in many cases, the speaker would, in course of telling a story, be himself trying to make sense of the memory for himself. The use of oral history methods is important because I am not interested only in the 'facts' or official story but in the individual memory and individual struggle and the details and meanings which would not be present in the official documents.

My interest in researching the topic from an oral history framework stems from the lack of work done on the life stories of the merchants, inhabitants and in general the community members of the old souqs. This approach involved the use of guiding themes or probes rather than interview questions, which I felt would restrict the responses that I get from the speaker. The use of oral history methods was important because I was interested in an individual's memory of the struggle and the details and meanings that are not present in official documents. Portelli (1991, 50) states, "the first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*." Therefore the use of oral history methodology in writing about the old city center, its history and changes, is an ideal way through which the memory, life and character of the city center can be documented and remembered. Oral history as a method requires a cooperative approach, which allows people authority over history and over what they say (Thompson 1998). It also allows a multiplicity of standpoints "witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, unprivileged, and the defeated... It provides a more realistic and fair construction of the past, a challenge to the established history" (Thompson 1998: 28). My choice of using oral history methods also stems from the position that the documenting of peoples life stories is a necessary

part of writing history, and in this case serves not just to preserve a memory of a place, but also serves as a detailed testimony by the Rights Holders of their forced displacement by the reconstruction project carried out by Solidere, which some are hopeful might help in their plight against Solidere. “To tell a story,” Portelli states, “is to take arms against the threat of time, to resist time, or to harness time. The telling of a story preserves the teller from oblivion; the story builds the identity of the teller and the legacy which she or he leaves for the future” (Portelli, 1991, 59).

## **Literature Review**

Two main bodies of literature inform my research, city studies and memory studies. In researching the reconstruction of the Beirut city centre, literature on anthropology of the city sheds light on the ways in which cities worldwide have been subject to change, through reconstruction and demographically. In particular, the literature that focuses on the rise of “global cities” and the neoliberalization of space are important in providing a frame by which to address the massive scale of the reconstruction in Beirut, and the social, economic, and political changes that were a part of it. While literature on cities helps frame the reconstruction of the Beirut city centre, literature on memory aims to provide a lens through which writing a social history of urban spaces can be done. For my research, this literature provided an understanding of the important role of memory in researching and talking about space, and the role that memory can play in writing about the old souqs through the life stories of the merchants who made up the souqs.

In anthropology, studies of the city deal with a variety of issues related to the city, urban development, urban governance, planning, research on social groups in the city and much more. These have undergone much theoretical change, from characterizing cities as ecological niches (Low and Lawrence 1990) in the 1920's and 30s, to studies in the 1950s classifying them as being made up of a series of urban communities (Low 1996). Following that more attention was paid to conflict over urban planning and urban renewal, indicating an understanding that those using the space were usually excluded from redevelopment processes of the city (Low 1996). These studies set the stage for critiques of architecture and planning as a means of control. The 1980s marked an important transition in studies of the city with the introduction of political economy, whereby more ethnographic work exploring how structural forces shape the urban experience emerged.

Particularly of importance in city studies is the 'globalized city' studied by David Harvey (2009) and Saskia Sassen (1996). This usually refers to cities such as New York, Tokyo and London as centers of technology and finance. In these cities transnational economic forces have more weight than local policies, radically transforming their economic base, spatial organization and social structure. It is this idea of the global city that influenced the reconstruction project of Beirut's central district. In addition there have been important studies on urban planning and architecture such as Timothy Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt*, and Paul Rabinow's *The French Modern*, seeking to explain the emergence of colonial cities where modern technologies and planning ethos are used to build new societies to "indoctrinate citizens within the spatial confines of rationally planned towns" (Low 1996: 395).



Most of anthropological work on the city has been on space and forms of control and are influenced by Michel Foucault's work on the relationship between power and space, and the use of architecture as a disciplinary technique. My research will use the research in this field to draw upon how individuals and groups frequent a particular urban space and inhabit it. This requires avoiding the categorization of a city as a particular type and allowing **the social practices** to inform the way the city is viewed. In the case of the shopkeepers or merchants of the souqs in Beirut, the souqs played multiple roles in their lives. Primarily they were spaces of economic activity, but in addition they were spaces that facilitated the formation of lifelong friendships and family relations. As some inhabitants recall, the souqs were places where people from all socio-economic, religious and also national backgrounds would meet and interact. People used the space in different ways, as consumers, as merchants, as visitors, and as residents. In my research I aim to look at how particular users of this space, the merchants, socially construct the space of the souqs.

Hence, the focus on the everyday practice and experience of space becomes important as users bring in their tactics; walking, naming, narrating and remembering the city (de Certeau 1984). Michel de Certeau (1984) states that the 'city' is what happens unintentionally. It is the movement of people in a space, in harmony and conflict with each other, which produces relations that are the substance of the city. This is the city that is not seen, but experienced, the city that is not the architectural city but the lived city. The city is therefore the space that allows for these social relations to take place and at the same time, the social relations and the everyday practice is what give the space its meaning- what makes it a city. Peoples stories about their daily life in the souqs reconstructs the everyday life of the city and gives the space meaning that greatly

contrasts it to the globalized urban space that the city center represents today. Likewise, Low states that, “the city as a site of everyday practice provides valuable insights into the linkages of macroprocesses with the texture and fabric of the human experience” (1996: 384). For Omar and the traders I spoke to, memory was not only an ideal national form or image, but was also about tactics, everyday practices and stories about the space. Telling the stories of their lives in the old souqs was a personal way of reclaiming the past and resisting the reconstruction. It was also a way of trying to deal with their present situation and personal everyday lives.

Questions of history and society become spatially defined; the space represents something or excludes something in the selective representation (Lefebvre 1996). Historically the city has been seen as a whole, or an organism, and the development of the city merely as consequential of changes in the society, a historical progression of space. This kind of thought undermines the power of ideology in the creation, evolution and function of the city, and more importantly the connection of the city to the rest of the society, towns and villages. The city does not function as a whole in and of itself, it changes as society changes, it develops with all the different parts of society, both spatial and social. Furthermore, the city is closely connected to individuals and groups. The city therefore is affected by two factors: on the one hand by people and groups that are organized and have relations among themselves, and on the other hand by the larger societal institutions which govern not just the city but the whole society (Lefebvre 1996).

## Memory and Space

The second body of literature is memory and space studies, within this body of literature, the main issues I address are that of remembering after displacement, and the idealization of the past. This thesis will address the uses of collective memory and its relationship to space. Collective memory was first theorized by Maurice Halbwachs, a student of Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim. Halbwachs states that individual memory is shaped by the social group that a person belongs to during a particular period of time. The individual belongs to many social groups, each of which have a collective memory of their own. Personal memories are attached to the experience within the social group and it is only through the group that a certain viewpoint of the past is developed. Collective memory is flexible allowing for lapses in individual memory, the passing of time and personal development. Historical memory, argues Halbwachs is the moment at which the individual or collective memory of an event no longer exists, “that historical memory is a representation of a lost past, and its only recollection. The past no longer exists as collective memory” (Halbwachs cited in Crane 1997: 1377). Collective memory and historical memory are different in two main ways, first, collective memory is continuously interpreted and it brings the past into the present, in other words the memory is always present. In contrast, historical memory “begins when living memory with the past is lost” (Crane 1997: 1377). Secondly, collective memory is multiple while historical memory is unitary- having one authoritative representation.

Pierre Nora (1989) also theorized on the difference between memory and history. Nora argues that objects and places, which he calls *sites*, are fixed locations where memory is deposited and reified. Such sites of memory are a move away from the idea of natural, collective memory and represent a deliberate attempt to preserve

memory in historical ways such as through archives and museums (Crane 1997). This involves the obliteration of spontaneous memory, or everyday individual memory, for a memory that is preserved and unchanging. This social dominance over remembered history begs a rethinking about memory, and the importance of listening to memory that is social and ‘primitive’, not modern. History, therefore, is modern memory. History has erased memory because when memory becomes mediated it then becomes history; when it is no longer spontaneous and everyday- it is no longer social memory. Ultimately Nora is arguing that history has become the memory of the present at the expense of everyday spontaneous memory (Nora 1989).

While theorists such as Halbwachs and Nora refer to memory as a concrete ‘thing’, other theorists critique this view of memory and explain it as practice and process. Olick and Robbins (1998), by giving a detailed overview of the history of memory and the way memory has been thought of and used at different times show that memory was and is continuously changing, a process. Memory is connected to the expansion of literacy, where pre-literate societies are seen as depending on memory, memorization in particular. Some argue that literate memory takes a less important place as documentation grows (Olick and Robbins 1998).

Other ways in which memory is used in theory is in the discourse of nationalism. In these cases, what is sought is to create national communities by bolstering a nationalism based on myths and memories of the collective nation. Such cases can for example be the remembrance of a certain “golden age” through nostalgia, or national myths associated to certain places which become sites of heritage that glorify the nation (Olick and Robbins 1998). To counter this dominant discourse of memory, writers on memory have looked to practices that challenge memory from above by looking at

groups and perspectives that have not been traditionally part of history making. In this trend is the practice of oral history that claims to give voice to those from below.

In the specific case of Beirut, memory studies frame the reconstruction project as an act of forgetting or forced amnesia, and one that also generated nostalgia for the old Beirut. Through reconstruction, critical theorists argue that the process of transforming Beirut into a global city necessitated the complete forgetting and obliterating of all things that would connect the new city to the past (Yahya, 2007). However, this process of forced forgetting spurred on a surge of remembering and nostalgia. Nostalgia is evident in many books published at that time, such as Machnouk's 'Beirut, jAMILAT al-sabah (Beirut, Morning Beauty)' and Itani and Faroukhi's 'Beirutna (Our Beirut)' (Sawalha 2010). Haugbolle (2010) argues that this sort of nostalgia shows that people wished to connect to the past, or certain romanticized imaginaries of the past. This nostalgia allows for a social continuity of the story of Beirut before it was destroyed, that would otherwise have been obliterated. Memory has been seen as that which runs counter to the dominant narratives of history, or of understanding the past. But to go beyond the divide between memory and history, memory can also be seen as the way that the people are social persons rather than individuals and therefore memory is the medium through which they are "bearers of their predecessors and their social roles..." (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003: 10).

Memory is volatile and changing; it changes as life and societies change (Nora 1989). Memory is itself highly social and at the same time it produces social spaces. Remembering is an active process and it can have as strong a purpose as does the weight of history. Memories are not only testaments, they can be acts of opposition to that which is considered official and authoritative. Sites of memory are specific spaces

and structures that solidify a particular event or moment in time. With this act, the active memory is stopped. One only needs to look at these monuments to remember what it is that is supposed to be remembered. In the case of Solidere's reconstruction of Beirut, the historic buildings that were preserved are supposed to become the exhaustive sites of memory, monuments that are de-contextualized and are mere representations of something past. Stripped of their social context, these monuments serve to remind those who have different memories, of their loss. However, the dominance of sites of memory does not entirely erase the spontaneous and active memory of people, on the contrary, as with the case of Beirutis in opposition to Solidere, spontaneous and individual memory is necessary and deliberate. This form of memory comes up in conversations about the city center, in visits to the city center, and in memories of pre-war Beirut and the people's loss of their public space. These memories come in opposition to the imposed forgetting and to the sites of memory.

There is conflict between the selected memory imposed from above by the Lebanese state and by Solidere, and the active social memory that people have of the places they knew and the experiences they lived. These memories of the past serve as a way to counter the hegemonic discourse of those in power, and a way to claim the right to the city and the right to remembering the history of the place. It is through these memories that the social history of space is recounted, not through the official discourse. Particular memories revolve around the socially and religiously mixed character of old Beirut, especially around the area of the souqs. In this case social memory provides a type of historical data, especially useful when documentation is lacking that helps people reconstruct an 'effective past', and also highlights how history is experienced, changed and used in the present. Social memory is useful in this case

because it assists in revealing the meanings people give to their ‘conditions and social relations’, and shows how the community actually perceives things in the past as well as now (Collard 1989).

### **Outline of the Thesis**

Chapter two of this thesis will examine the life story of Omar Lababidi, from his childhood in the city centre, to building a career as a trader, and finally to the beginning of the civil war when Omar was forced to abandon his shop and leave the country. Omar’s narrative of his life in the city center shows his deep connection to the city, showing the legitimacy he derives from being a Beirut and a trader. The use of memory serves to legitimize Omar’s connection to the city center and the authority he has in telling the history of the space.

The following chapter will discuss the process of reimagining the old *Beirut Souqs* through the memories of its’ traders. Omar’s and others memories serve as a way of telling the social history of the space. Memory, in this case, is an anti hegemonic practice, aiming to claim the city center through embedding oneself in it. This chapter will show the uses of the space through peoples memories, and the ways in which memories are nostalgic and idealistic. In light of Omar and others memories of the place as unifying the different Lebanese social classes and sects, an examination of the social, economic and sectarian (or non-sectarian) character of the city in the past and the present will be discussed. This will shed light on the issues of social classes in Lebanon and the ways in which these changed from the past to the post civil war years, in

addition to discussing the rise of sectarianism, particularly in the later years of the civil war, and its manifestation in the present day.

Solidere's reconstruction project was part of major changes that occurred in Lebanon following the civil war, and with the emergence of Rafic Hariri. Chapter four will look at the story of Omar's struggle with Solidere, and the physical manifestation of his suffering and loss. The loss through gentrification was not simply a loss of property, but also of social relations and social practice. This chapter will discuss Omar's experience with Hariri, and the ways in which material loss caused him suffering and the total loss of his livelihood, the deterioration of his health and his personal life. Finally I will conclude by looking at the ways in which the Solidere project has been continuously resisted since its onset, on a personal level by Omar and also by the Association of Property Rights Holders, showing that resistance to the project is not only through memory, but also through an ongoing legal struggle.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE STORY OF OMAR

From some people you get answers. From others you get stories –

#### **Growing Up in the Old Beirut Souqs**

“I want to thank you for your visit and I’m begging you please don’t cut out a single word that I said it’s my responsibility. Anyways I am known, Omar Abdallah Lababidi, I’m a Beirut and I was born here in Beirut in 1933 that means I am 77 years old [in 2010] and I can walk but I take twelve different medications. And sometimes I walk with a stick. And may God give me life and may he not let me stay sitting at home, because staying at home is hard and may he not let me need anyone and may God grant you a long life. And I will find the pictures for you, the pictures of Beirut, and you can see how pretty Beirut was. Really, *di’ān* Beirut [where are they gone the glory days of Beirut].” – Omar Lababidi.

Omar is a Beirut, as he likes to identify himself, born and raised in the very center of the city. Unlike all other merchants I spoke to, and indeed unlike almost all merchants in general, Omar actually grew up in the city center with four brothers and three sisters, only one of who also made a living as a merchant in the old souqs. His father owned a *pension*, or guesthouse, above which was their family home, in Souq Sursoq. The guesthouse was bought in the 1920s by his father, having sold a piece of land in Raouche to pay for it. The guesthouse was smaller when he bought it, and he built their home on top of the first floor, which served as the guesthouse. Omar tells me that the guesthouse used to have notable guest, like the Mufti of the Beqaa, and Abdel Rahim Mrad, among others, which he mentions with pride. It is a way to show how connected their family was to the city and to the people, and at the same time it also

highlights the different nature of relations between people and politician and leaders – a fact that he mentions many times during our conversations. Omar claims the city as rightfully his because he is from a Beirut family, but also importantly because he believes he is essentially a part of the city and a part of its history, having participated in formative political events of the country, and having preserved the Lebanese identity by being a trader and working hard and contributing to the success of his country. As such he sees himself as part of the history of Beirut. His earliest memories and happiest memories in his life all took place in the city centre:

“Before St. George, there is an area called “Four Rocks”, they were big rocks and people used to go down and lay their clothes on the four rocks and swim. This is the “St. Balash” (meaning a free beach). I used to have a goat, those were good days. I had a goat, and I used to take *urch mabkhoush* [Piastre with a hole in the middle] from my father. I would go to the Hall, where the statue of Riad el-Solh is, may he rest in peace, that’s where the Hall was, you would go in there to the blacksmiths souq, the vegetables, the meat and such. I would buy *um ulaybeneh* [green chickpeas], these were the chick peas, *um ulaybeneh*, with half a lira, it was called a *nigleh*, then I would buy *qallita* [a kind of bread], this is something like a bread they would cut it with a knife, and put sumac and thyme in it. But not like now, now they put *nkhaleh* in it. They put *nkhaleh*. They used to put sumac and thyme, half a lira. I would take this for me, and put them in a bag, a paper bag there were no plastic bags, and go down and swim and the goat would be with me. I would swim and then we would go back. The goat would eat... also there was a station, at the end of the Patriarch Houeik street, as you are going down to your right hand, there was a French station, the French were there, and over there was a water pump. The goat would wash his face, and drink from the basin, and I would wash my face like this, and wear my trousers or shorts, and my shirt and go home, to Souq Sursoq, and the he would eat the *um ulaybeneh*, and I would eat *qallita*.

Now one of these days my dear, we went down to the beach and swam and came out, we didn’t find either the sandal or the trousers, or the *um ulaybeneh* or the *qallita*! How were we going to solve this problem? As we were walking we went past the French station, they saw me walking in the swim suit, so they gave me, one of the French soldiers gave me his shirt, but what a shirt, it looked like a dress on me. so I wore it and the goat drank. The goat would look at me, “baaaaa”, and he would walk behind me.

Over there, there were soldiers, the soldiers, the French soldiers, and I was wearing a French shirt with the design (strings), and I was a child. They started talking to me in French, I told him “camarade camarade” meaning a friend had given it to me, they wouldn’t understand. There was a wrestler, Edmond el Za’ni, he would have a stick under his arm, a thick one, and he would wear shorts and socks like this (high below the knee), I said “*khawaja* [Mr.] Edmond, come and translate”, and he was heavy of hearing, but he spoke French. They wanted to take me to the station, there was a station at Adlieh. How come you are wearing this, where did you take it from, whats the story, we want to know. So I told them story and he [Edmond] told it to them in French, they said well we have to go and ask at the *qishli* [qishli: means a stopping place for soldiers, I translated it above as station], they went and asked, and he said it was true. Aha so now they wanted to make amends, so they asked where I wanted to go, I told them, “I want to go to my house”, eh. In the old time, the cars where like this in front, manual [he is talking about the cars that had to wound and was showing me how] “vrrr vrrr” eh, the driver, and they would open from behind, the back seat would be uncovered, you would sit like this, they put me and the goat in the back, and the horn was like a ball, like this, “beep beep beep”, you would press it and it would honk. Well and we sat, we honked, and we went. They took me home. This is a story I will never forget.”

I refer at length to this story of Omar’s because of its importance to him, as a childhood memory and as a picture of the simplicity of his life in the city center. Through such memories, we are able to imagine a life within the city center that portrays a different image of the center than one that is commonly thought of, as a commercial area. Such a story embeds Omar within the heart of the city, connected not only to its buildings and souqs, but to all its streets, and all the people that were part of the space, from a time before the Lebanese independence, when French soldiers were in control over the area. Omar takes me on a journey through the process of remembering and telling the story, through the streets that lead to the coast, where he swam, and back to center, to the police station and among people that perhaps other merchants would not know or have that relation with, such as the French soldiers, and the wrestler Edmond el Za’ni. By doing so, Omar paints a picture not just of his life, but of the

changing life and structure of the city, from a child to a merchant, and from the mandate to independence as I will refer to below. By being so deeply embedded in the heart of the city, Omar derives legitimacy as a “real” Beirut, who has the authority to talk about the city center and the souqs and to recount their history, and also to tell the story of their destruction one which he is a part of. His memories serve to illustrate this, that Beirut is his city, he knows its, he grew up in it and he changed with it, it is an important point which distinguishes him from many of the other merchants who worked in the souqs. By focusing on memories of his childhood we can see the how connected Omar is to the city center and to formative political events in the country’s history, thereby showing how his growth is linked to the growth and changes of the city and the wider country. Omar’s testimonies also give him legitimacy over those who are non-Beirutis and further justify his claims to the city.

Omar has both the legitimacy of being a real Beirut and a Lebanese nationalist. He participated and played an important part in the Lebanese independence demonstrations of 1943, even though he was very young at the time. During the year of Lebanon’s Independence in 1943, on November 11th, Bechara el-Khoury and Riad el-Solh and others were imprisoned by the French mandate forces after a series of constitutional amendments were passed abolishing the clause that stated that the French mandate authority was the only source of power and jurisdiction in Lebanon. Protests took place in the city center demanding the release of the imprisoned (Traboulsi 2007). Omar played a part in the demonstrations and it was one of the unique memories he has as someone growing up in the middle of the city:

“Us kids, the youth, we had demonstrations, and Emile Edde was assigned as the temporary president we insulted him, we ‘made noise’,

and messed up the *Burj*. The municipality used to put up French flags, the French flag is white, blue, red and there [draws with his hands] in the circle a small cross, a sign at the top and a sign at the bottom. This is the French flag during the days of De Gaulle. And this French flag was on the municipality building, we were having a demonstration, I was a young boy, a young child, they got a big stick, like this [demonstrates to me], one person climbs on the shoulders of the other, eh...to be able to get to the first floor of the municipality building, they needed someone small, “Come Lababidi Omar!” and I got up I climbed on the first one and the second person, and I jumped. I was bringing down the flag, I got shot, a bullet right here [points to his forearm], I didn’t feel it, yes, yes a bullet, it still shows till now.” – Omar Lababidi.

Omar’s active role in the demonstrations of 1943 show his allegiance to his country, something he repeatedly mentions in our conversations, and show his belief in the centrality of the souqs and city center in the making and preserving of modern Lebanese history. Omar *is* history in this case, having actually sacrificed and paid for Lebanon with his blood, suffering from a bullet wound as a result of his participation in the demonstrations. It is necessary to note the dominance that city center has in Omar’s narrative of Lebanon and Lebanese history. As also expressed by other merchants, the old city center was a meeting place for the whole country, it also stood as a symbol of everything that Lebanon and Lebanese imagined they were after the war – multi-religious, from different social classes, and traders at heart. The memory of the country is to a large degree confined to the memories of the city center. With the destruction of the center through reconstruction, the once central role that Omar played disappeared, just as the city did, and his personal sacrifices and efforts in the history of the center were forgotten and no longer relevant, silenced, just as the memory of the old city was. His growth coincided with Beirut’s growth, and his destruction coincided with her destruction as well.

## Building a life - Working in the Old Beirut Souqs

From the narration of his story from one corner of one souq in central Beirut, we are able to hear the narration of a history of the old Beirut Souqs, and sometimes the history of the country. Omar's recounting of his life story is important in giving his life witness and meaning, and in giving the lives of many others like him meaning as well. At the age of twelve, Omar decided he no longer wanted to study and wanted to make his way as a trader. He began working without the knowledge of his parents. They initially opposed him, however, he convinced them that it was what he wanted to do and he began to work bit-by-bit, beginning with selling knick-knacks on a *kasheh* around his neck. He says he did not want the support of his parents or anyone else, he wanted to succeed in the trade on his own, and so he did.

“...I came and was wearing a *kasheh*, and my father saw me on the road, I used to be in school, you know I didn't have a moustache. My father looked at me and said “go up to the house.” I went up. He broke the *kasheh* and he hit me, he told me, “go to school,” [pause], “I don't want to study, I want to be a trader.” “Listen, understand.” I told him no. I announced my hunger strike...

I stayed for two days, they said break the strike, I said first of all I want to go to the souqs, I want to carry my *kasheh*, and I want 25 liras to pay for it, the one that my father had broken. He gave me 25 liras, he kissed me and told me go my son, may God favor you.

“Let me tell you something, in the Beirut Central District, in 1950 I began. I was carrying a *kasheh* around my neck in Souq Sursouq, I used to sell combs and razors, cologne and lipstick and powder, things like that [pause]. In 1954, 1954 I bought a store, actually 1953 I bought a store in Souq Abu Nasr, I paid 2,000 Lebanese Liras. I was sixteen years old, I had no beard, I had no moustache [pause]. I worked... I used to open at 7 am and close at 7 pm. And liras! [he made money] and I worked. I used to sell toys and *khirdawet* [household tools, trinkets]. Eh... I used to peddle at the door of the store in Souq Abu Nasr facing the first entrance of the door of the jewelry souk. At the Jewelry Souq there are people from all over the world, the Syrian, the Sudanese, the Tunisian, the

American, the British, it was the Gold Souq, there were different kinds of gold, eh. In 1955-56, I bought a store in Azariyeh, it was the Tawileh [souq]. Eh... In the 60's I bought a store in Weygand Street, it was around 3 by 2 meters. I used to sell lighters and used to fix lighters. There wasn't even a chair for me to sit on. I saved money and I went and bought a store in Martyr's Square from Abdullah Bustros, I paid four hundred thousand lira." – Omar Lababidi.

Having a shop of one's own and being a self-made trader is an important status for Omar. It is an entry in to the souqs and thus to the whole city. Annika Rabo, in *A Shop of One's Own* (2005) discusses the importance of owning a shop for the traders of Aleppo, Syria, a shop gives them legitimacy of being from Aleppo and have a claim over the city. From an early age Omar decided he wanted to be a trader, realizing he had no patience for schooling, and began his work without the knowledge of his parents, selling small items on a board hung around his neck. His decision to leave school might also be linked to the prestige associated with being a trader in the heart of the city. Omar would stop at nothing to establish himself as a trader, it is what he dedicated his whole life too, even taking up an English language course at the American University of Beirut, to be able to strengthen his work in the souqs. For Omar being a trader was a way of maintaining and strengthening his connection to the city, it was the ultimate way to be a part of the city center, as the center was known primarily for being the commercial heart of the country. Having a shop of his own is pivotal to his work and his identity as a Beiruti, it is something he stresses repeatedly, that the one goal he had was to have a shop specifically on the *Burj*, itself being the very center and the very busiest of the souqs.

Omar built up his trade gradually over the years, saving money until he was able to rent his first space at the age of sixteen, in 1953 in Souq Abu Nasr facing the entrance of the Gold Souq, costing him 2,000 Lebanese Liras. He used to open up from 7 am to 7

pm, and he sold household tools and trinkets. In Souq Abu Nasr, Omar didn't actually have a shop, but rather sold goods right outside a shop, a practice common in many of the souks, where shop owners would also rent out the space in front of their stores, and the traders who rented it would display their items for sale.

“...when I was in Souq Abu Nasr, the shop was very small and there was a shade that used to cover the front of the store. I used to stand under the shade with the rain pouring and sell the toys, I was wearing a trench coat and under the trench coat I was wearing a jacket and under the jacket I was wearing a sweater and under the sweater I was wearing a long sleeve t shirt and under that I was wearing a short sleeve t-shirt and under that I was wearing a vest. I used to go home with money and my poor mother used to squeeze my clothes out and the water would fall out. We used to sit around the coal pot; there was no central heating, or others. There was a coal pot; this is in the 50's I'm telling you about. We used to warm ourselves around the coal, the important thing is I had money and I wanted to buy a store on the *Burj*. Rafic Hariri took them away from me. He took away all my hard work. Which is why I ask from God never to forgive Rafic Hariri.”

“You know before I bought the store I used to carry a *kasheh* around my neck. In Souq Sursoq, every Monday morning, I used to buy a gold British coin and save it. After two years of doing this I unraveled the *kasheh* - we used to call it *kasheh* but it's actually made of cloth - and I exchanged them. Back in the day the gold coin used to be worth 13 to 14 liras or 12 liras, they turned out to be 2,000 lira, and I bought the store. The landlord told me to go get my father, I was a child, I was sixteen years old, how was I able to buy a store? Go get your father he told me. They asked me where I had gathered all this money. And I said, honestly, I have been carrying this *kasheh* around my neck. From this *kasheh* I was able to buy a house at the Naher, in the fifties. And after that I sold it to be able to buy a store in Azariyeh. And I bought the store in Azariyeh, and I sold that to buy the store in Weygand Street. It was the most lavish street in Beirut. Weygand Street facing the municipality. This was a fortune, a fortune, a fortune, a fortune.” – Omar Lababidi.

This is how Omar began, moving from peddling, to having a space in front of a shop, to finally having his own shop in 1955-56 [he is uncertain of the exact date] which was in Azariyeh. From there, in the 1960s he bought a store in Weygand Street, he told



me it measured around 3 by 2 meters, a small store in which he sold lighters and fixed lighters. The shop was so small there was no chair for him to sit on. He saved up money until he bought the last store he would buy in the city centre, on the *Burj*. The gradual mobility of Omar's career as a trader is an important part of his life story and his position in the city. He was self-made, starting from nothing, peddling in multiple souqs and working on days off to gradually save and move up in his life, and through the souqs. Omar speaks in the belief that with opportunity and hard work, a person could make something of himself, there was the promise of social mobility. The city center can be viewed as a space that presented this opportunity to people and to Beirutis in particular. This distinction between himself and Hariri is important, for as Omar mentions, Hariri came from nowhere, he was not a Beirutis and he did not work for the wealth that he amassed. For Omar, his displacement from the souqs caused him great suffering of material loss, emotional and social loss. By speaking about his entire life in the city centre, from his childhood until he was displaced, he shows how deeply connected he was to the place, people, and pace of life.

The memories that Omar speaks about from his life in the souqs detail his relations to the people of Beirut, and in particular to the ruling elite of the country. He mentions numerous times, the ease with which it was possible to contact and speak to politicians, and to have favors done by them – though it was not considered a favor as such, rather it was the very nature of relations between the people and their politicians, as he says. However, Omar's relations with these figures and his personal connections to them reflect his standing as a Beirutis and his rootedness in the center, something not necessarily common between himself and other traders. Coming from a Beirutis family,

and connected to Beirut's elite is a unique aspect of his life story and his experience in the city center. It is something that is reiterated regularly in our conversations:

“There is also August Bakhos the Maronite. He used to tell me you're my brother. Camil Chamoun, Camil Chamoun the President of the old Lebanese. He opened up my store on the *Burj*. Salah Lababidi and Camil Chamoun used to be friends, he was my father's cousin. [In a high voice] There is no difference *ya amo* there is no difference, at all, at all, really, really.

Oh!!! Let me tell you for instance, my store was in Souq Abu Nasr. If someone wants to go on the Hajj, he used to go to every one of his neighbors in the souk to ask forgiveness. Whether he was Christian or Muslim. One of my neighbors was Michel Amine Farah, God bless him, he passed away. I was like his son. I swear to God, I swear on who gave birth to you, he who used differentiate between Muslims and Christians was a dog. There was no such thing, don't even talk about it. Don't talk about it at all, at all, at all. The politician was the *abaday* [strong] politician. I'm telling you I used to go into Camil Chamoun's house as if I was going into my own house.” – Omar Lababidi.

Most of Omar's stories and memories of growing up and building a life in the souqs are interjected with the mention of Rafic Hariri. He cannot remember what he had without remembering what he lost, and why. In the particular case of Omar, as he was able to personally meet Hariri, there is also the issue of his inability as a Beirut, not just a rights holder, to keep his rightful claim in the city. Whereas in previous stories, we can see that his standing with Lebanon's politicians was an important part of his Beirut identity, reflecting his ability to speak directly to them, to ask services of them and be given them, the opposite is true of his experience with Hariri. He was unable, though he helped him, to get anything in return from Hariri and Solidere, and this is part of the story of the drastically changed position of himself, and of the city in general.

In the story of his life in the city center, the culmination of Omar's work and life in the city center was his two shops on the *Burj*.

I opened a store in 1974 and I stocked it with toys from Ayssar Amer, may God rest his soul, Ayssar Amer. I stocked it with toys for a period of one month. Then I started to decorate it and bring clothes. We closed up in May 1975. The *Burj* never used to close. We used to open at 7 am and close at 12 pm. I used to have 12 employees, and now I am less than one employee. An employee would earn 700 liras, 700 to 800 liras. This used to have a very good value. One of my employees his name is Omar Hammoud, he was married to two women and he was able to provide for two families with this salary. He was my employee. I closed up my store and went to Abu Dhabi.”

### **The End of the Souqs - Displacement through Civil War**

Like all merchants in the old Beirut Souqs, Omar was forced to close down his store with the beginning of the war in 1975. He never went back until the end of the war. Omar moved from Beirut to Abu Dhabi, arriving there with merchandise worth 15,000 US Dollars which he had shipped from Italy. During his days in the old souqs, Omar used to travel to Italy as well as other countries such as Austria and Turkey to buy merchandise for his shop. He arrived to Abu Dhabi, as he says with no place to stay and nowhere to sell his goods.

“I left in 1975, 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, 1975. I closed my shop on Martyr’s Square, eh, and I went to Abu Dhabi, taking with me merchandise from Italy, from one of my friends as a loan, and I had in my pocket only 400 Dollars. I went to sleep in a hotel, there were two hotels in Abu Dhabi, the Hilton, and Saba Hotel, the Hilton was good a 5 star hotel, in Saba was were the Indians used to sleep, head to toe... So I went to the Hilton, I asked about the price of a room, he told me 400 Dirham, so I calculated it, 400 Dirham would make 100 Dollars, and I was carrying merchandise worth around 15,000 Dollars, I wanted to sell it as wholesale. So if stayed for more than 4 days, and I paid 400 Dollars, I would not have any money left. Eh, so where was I to sleep? I went and slept on the sidewalk, eh! ... I woke up in the morning in a terrible state, heat! The temperature my dear would reach 40 degrees! 40 degrees! And it was so humid! I was wringing out my clothes, I was wet. Until I found a friend

of mine, he saw me and asked, “what are you doing here Omar Lababidi?” I told him I have merchandise, so and so...” “where are you staying?” I told him, “I wanted to go to a hotel but I couldn’t find one, and I have no money.” So he told me, “come with me to my home.” And I sold the merchandise.” – Omar Lababidi.

Omar spent eighteen years in Abu Dhabi opening a shop there, and while there, his children travelled abroad for their university education, the eldest studying pharmacy in London, and the second and third child studying in the American Univeristy in Anakara. Omar spoke fondly of Abu Dhabi and the treatment of respect that he got there. As he does when talking of Beirut, he talks about the ease of meeting and knowing personally the countries rulers. Omar talks of Sheikh Zayed, and having coffee with him, and he describes the ease with which he was able to relate and deal with Emirati people, who he characterizes as “kind and sweet”. He respects and speaks of the Emirati rulers in the same way he talks about respecting Lebanon’s leaders before the civil war.

“Look the Emirati people are very nice, and their rulers. Sheikh Zayed, he was very sweet, may he rest in peace, he is humanistic, and popular, he doesn’t have security going around with him, no motorcycles in front of him or behind him, he used to drive a car on his own without any security. He used to sit, for instance, I once saw him facing my shop in souq, in uh, Abu Dhabi, he was with his *Shuyukh*, and his guards, and they were sitting, he had a long stick, *khayzaran*, and they were sitting on the sand, and he was drawing. “Sheikh Zayed, let me get you some coffee, what do you need?” he told me, “No *ya abuyeh*, [my son] you come have a drink of coffee with us” (he says it in the Gulf accent). And I did, and they served me coffee and dates, Sheikh Zayed, just how you are now sitting with me, that’s how he was sitting.” – Omar Lababidi.

Omar talks about his time in Abu Dhabi briefly, describing mostly, not his trade, but his social connections there with the ruling elite and people of power. It is a continuation of his standing in Beirut society, having connections to people in power

and having the ability to reach them and to expect services from them. He recalls an incident in Abu Dhabi of the same nature, where he approached a ruler with a trade related issue and had his problem solved almost immediately. Just as in Beirut, he was privy to the benefits that come with being connected to the elite of the country. As such he also has a good and successful business in Abu Dhabi, with the support of its people. He says of the period he worked and when he decided to leave:

“And I worked, I expanded my stores, where I would sell retail and wholesale, and I became known, and my children, I sent them, the eldest I taught in London, now he is a pharmacist. The middle child I taught in Ankara, and the girl I taught in Ankara. They learnt and got their degrees, and they are working. But when I left Abu Dhabi, I went to all the banks to settle my dues, they asked me “why [are you leaving]? Did we upset you?” “not at all, this is your due, and my greetings to you, and Sheikh Zayed, may he be blessed” I wrote in the newspapers, and I came here.” – Omar Lababidi.

As in Beirut, Omar stresses that he worked hard for the wealth and success that he got, expanding his stores and from them being able to teach his children and live a comfortable life. What are important are the similarities to be drawn between Omar’s life in Beirut and in Abu Dhabi, his access to elites, his social standing and his personal influence and recognition in the eyes of the people of the city or country. That itself is what grants him legitimacy in both Beirut, as his city, and in Abu Dhabi which for 18 years he adopted as his.

In 1993, Omar came back to Beirut to reopen his shop on the *Burj*, in fact he had been still paying for the shop even during his stay in Abu Dhabi, as he had bought it by loan. He had bought one for himself, and one for his son. He had initially been told that the building in which his shops were located were not part of the Solidere plan. However, on arriving, he found there was no longer any building to speak of. It had

been torn down along with the old souqs and many other buildings and shops. Displacement caused a dramatic change in the lives of all. For Omar, displacement meant the loss of everything in his personal life. His marriage to his first wife ended when he could no longer provide for her the way he used to, and his children never settled in Lebanon as they were working in the Gulf. His story shows the extreme of loss and of suffering that in many of the writings on the old Beirut center has passed unmentioned.

“...I lost my family. I lost three boys, they were like a rose. Like a rose, I always cry, “where are my children?” When they call me they cry and I cry. May God never forgive you Rafic Hariri, for what you have done to me. I asked from almighty God to avenge Rafic Hariri, and to avenge his children. “Where do you come from Nader Hariri that you have a building now!” “Where are you from Ahmad Hariri that you are now a somebody!” [yelling] “Why Rafic Hariri? Why did you take other peoples properties? And out of the entire camel all you gave them was a hair.” Is this what is supposed to happen? Is this justice? This is unacceptable. “You had two billion, now they are seventeen billion.” Well what can we do, the rest is up to God. This is my story.” – Omar Lababidi.

Like in all memories of the city center, Rafic Hariri is continuously present. For Omar, a “real” Beiruti, the control of the city by a non-Beiruti, such as Rafic Hariri, and the his ability to become one by means of his wealth and political position, is something unacceptable. For him, Beirut is his, firstly because he is a Beiruti and therefore has a right to the city, unlike Hariri, and secondly, because he made himself out of his own hard work into a trader, which gives him another layer of legitimacy as a real Beiruti, and as having a legitimate right to the city, and finally he is a real Beiruti because he had a shop of his own in the city center.

The loss of his shop meant the loss of his life as he knew it, as he had worked for it and as he had imagined it to be. Omar’s life was the city, and it was through his shop

in the city and his place as an authentic Beirut, and furthermore a Beirut trader, the essence of Lebanese entrepreneurship, that he claimed the city and had legitimacy. Without it he lost himself both at work and as a Beirut and importantly within his own family. The loss of the shop also meant the deterioration of his marriage and his family life. His identity got lost as the identity of Beirut got lost after the reconstruction. It is important to note the precedence of the reconstruction as the real destruction and loss rather than the civil war. The perpetrators of the real violence and displacement for Omar, and other traders as well, are primarily the Hariris and those who supported them. Omar directly points out the names of the people he hold personally responsible for his loss, the Hariris who are criticized not just with destruction but with the theft of the city. They came from “nowhere” and gained massive amounts of wealth through this.

## CHAPTER THREE

### IMAGINING BEIRUT – REMEMBERING THE OLD SOUQS

“I have a store on Martyr’s Square, it’s called *Al‘āb Sahat el Burj*. My dear, this store didn’t used to close for five or six days before the holidays... Joy and prosperity and values and ethics and love, you wouldn’t think of Muslim and Christian [differences] never, never. Nor were there [any differences]. For example on the Christmas holidays we used to close our stores and go and wish them a Merry Christmas, *habayebna* [our loved ones]. And also the treatment... on New Year’s Eve, we close our stores, and stay up and celebrate New Year’s Eve together. New Years Eve nights were familial nights, for instance, the Muslims we go to the Christians, and Christians would go over to the Muslims, and... there wasn’t this division, not like now, Sunni, Shiite, Druze, eh... And also our politicians, they were politicians of correct politics. *Walla* I used to intend to go to, for instance, once I went to Taqieddine al-Solh’s at two in the night, I had a favor that I needed done, at 2 in the night, I woke him up. Now you can’t do this.

Also in the souqs they were all friends. The owners of the commercial souks and the commercial stores, and the owners, all of us, my dear, were Beirutis, eh... for the people of Beirut.” - Omar Lababidi

Omar Lababidi remembers and talks about the old Beirut Souqs in the same way that other merchants do, with fondness, happiness, and nostalgia for an idealized past. He talks about the past as if it is the present, in his speech, alternating between speaking of the souqs in the past tense and present tense. This hanging on to the past reflects on the one hand, a denial or inability to accept the present condition and the fact of displacement, and on the other hand it represents the very real feeling of a continued right to the city center. By talking about the past as if it were now, Omar revolts against the reconstruction project and refuses to accept it. For him, the city it still rightfully his and that of all the rights holders. With this refusal to legitimize the reconstruction through accepting it, Omar is also revolting against his current situation in Lebanon and



against the current political and social situation which has left him marginal. This is evident in the conversations we had, as he regularly alternates between talking about his memories and then reflecting on the present political, social and economic situation in the country. He continuously stresses that one's allegiance should be to his country and nation, and that is what Lebanon lacks today, and specifically how Lebanon's politicians drastically differ from the politicians and elites of his time. Again, the fact that Omar is self-made is a crucial point, as it differentiates him as a person from someone like Rafic Hariri, and also it is a point he uses to reflect on the general condition of the present as opposed to the past. Now, he says, money talks, and that is all. One's influence is not through his legitimacy but through his ability to "buy" loyalty.

The memories of the old souqs and the city center in general reveal different aspects of the peoples' memory and of the lives there, most prominent are memories of the unity and community of the souqs and merchants, and in particular its non sectarian nature. How does Omar remember the souqs and why does he remember them in that particular way? What do his memories tell us about the present situation as well as the past? How does displacement and loss shape the way Omar remembers and how he tells his personal story? Omar's memories of the old souqs and the way he remembers them is shared by other shopkeepers in the old souqs. Memories tend to portray an ideal of what the souqs used to be, and emphasize the unity among the different Lebanese socio-economic classes and religions.

## The Old Beirut Souqs – Claiming the City

“Listen let me tell you, the commercial souqs which are now called “Down Town”, on the contrary, it’s called you know like, Martyr’s Square, it’s called the Balad. And they were living, there was no sectarianism down there. Muslim, Christian, Druze, Shiite, the whole country was united. It was a country of fortune and good.” – Omar Lababidi.

The old Beirut Souqs were made up of numerous commercial souqs, in most cases a souq was specialized in one kind of trader, such as cloth, meat, jewelry among many others. The most well know of the souqs were the Gold Souq, the Cloth Souq, otherwise known as Souq el-W’iyeh, the meat, vegetable and fish souqs as food souqs, and Souq el-Franj in which exotic foods were found. Souq Ayass, Souq Sursoq, Souq el-Tawileh were clothes souqs, with Souq Sursoq being a popular souq while Souq el-Tawileh was known for its more luxurious clothing. Merchants and people who frequented the souqs have very similar and idealistic memories of the souqs, remembering the tourists who were constantly present, the crowds of customers, the friendships they had with their fellow traders and the sense of community and belonging they felt towards their particular souqs and the city center in general.

“You know long time ago, all the young ladies, all the young brides from everywhere in the Arab world and from the parts of Lebanon, they used to come with their moms downtown, just to buy what they needed for their wedding or for their married life, it was the *jhez* [trousse]. They used to go downtown for their *jhez*. And if they wanted to do down on seasonal basis, for dresses you’d see the new season all the people come in. And if on Fridays you’d come down to town, you’d see all the people coming in from all the Muslim places, because uh... Friday was a holiday everywhere else. They used to go to the gold markets and buy gold, and you’d see tourists for gold and jewelry. And on Saturdays you used to see people go shopping for their Sunday lunch, It was quite amazing, you’d see how the population used to move... according to their habits. Then you used to know exactly who the people were, they

were going after a marriage a ceremony, to provide things food, gold, you'd see them going there [indicates with her hand]. It was quite a lovely ambience...

It was like big families made from all sorts of communities, coming from different places, and that's it, it was really amazing mosaic of people, different people, different...cultures. [Pause] this ambience we have lost. [Pause] Now you see Beirut is a soulless city." – Leila Dimashqiyeh (Rights Holder).

Particular memories of the city center, of the different souqs and what they used to sell, of particular people with whom a merchant met every day, and memories of big events in the life of a person, help imbue the documentation of history with the details that created meanings for the space. It is these little stories, or episodes of memory that give life to the image of the old souqs. They serve as a testimony of what used to be, and by telling them in the all their detail, the narrator in one way is asking the interviewer to adopt the memories. In my case, it was also quite clear that what merchants and rights holders were telling me were not just stories. They were teaching me, they were hoping to convince me that indeed something great had been lost, and through me they hoped to get to a wider audience of people who were willing to listen and learn. This is evident not just in the detail of the stories I was told, but also in the way they were told to me. "Listen, let me tell you," "*Ya amo* I swear," "Don't ever believe it if they tell you..." and also, "thank for caring to work on this topic," "we are glad to help anyone who wants to work on this topic." These phrases reflect Omar's (and other speakers) assertion that their message and their story is the truth, and one that he wants the world to know. The story is rightfully his to tell, and by telling it to me he is keeping it alive and keeping the issue alive. Omar is not only assertive in the manner in which he speaks, but also in asking to have everything recorded and "registered" – to make it a statement and to have a claim to the old Beirut. It is one of the ways in which

Omar asserts his claim to the city and his legitimacy as the teller of the city's history, as for him, he was a part in the making of the history, character, and life of the city. As Omar, like others, lost everything, telling their memories and telling of their struggle is the only way left to claim the city.

George Abi Karam was a trader in Souq el-Tawileh, a souq that was bordered at the North by Tripoli Street, and the south by Weygand Street, and from which a street branched into Souq Ayass. George Abi Karam's family have been in the city center since 1928, when his grandfather's shop was in Souq Ayass and was a toy store, before moving to Souq el-Tawileh. He was told that it was around 1941 that the store was changed into a clothing store. George also lived his whole life in Beirut, in the Sassine area, walking distance from the centre, so for him, it was the center of his work life and social life and family life all in the same area. Souq el-Tawileh's name has multiple explanations, one is that it was named after the prominent Tawileh family that owned a large part of the souq, another states that it was named as such because it was a long street, but the popular explanation for it is that it was named Souq el-Tawileh after an Austrian woman who used to work there:

“Souq el-Tawileh, for instance, why did they call it Tawileh? There was one woman from Austria, she used to work at a seamstresses store, it was a commercial store, she's tall and beautiful, eh... where are you going [people would ask each other]? We are going to the '*tawileh*', so that they can sew me clothes. For that reason they called it Souq el-Tawileh.”  
– Omar Lababidi

George's memories of the souq are vivid. When he speaks he describes in meticulous details the character and life that the souq had, and he recounts his entire surroundings from when one would enter the souq, down to what kind of clothing was sold in the store:

“Everything is beautiful. How we used to go about, the crowds that where there, the beautiful narrow alleys, the stores that were bursting with merchandise, the products stacked over each other... nowadays you find single pieces and they don't even display them in the window. You used to go into the souq, from its beginning till its end and you find everything stuffed, everything displayed, perhaps this was the old way of doing things. Eh... but it was something beautiful. The styles were so beautiful and the foreigners! Eh... you would find people from all over the country, this is the first thing, and... and there were foreigners from all nationalities. And when a bride-to-be would go there she would need nothing more than Souq el-Tawileh, she would go to the souq and get everything (stressing on the everything), as the saying goes “*men al babouj la el tarboush!*” (meaning from head to toe). In our case, the bride would come in, true that we didn't have wedding dresses, mostly we had skirts and coats, we had blouses and we have accessories... bands, we have cardigans...we have slippers, not shoes, bedroom slippers. Yes... there was an atmosphere and especially during these days (March), there was the No Ruz holiday... the Iranians would come, and if an Iranian customer had liked a store and gotten used to it, you can't imagine how many customers she could get you. You cant imagine and she wont be complacent with taking one piece, she would take the entire series. And the lace scarves, we used to put lace scarves, they were very popular among the customers.” – George Abi Karam (Souq el-Tawileh)

There is conflict between the new identity and glorified image of the past that is imposed by the state and by Solidere, and the memories that people have of the places they knew and their lives there. In building a new city, Solidere sought to modernize and to revive the “glory of the past”, using the narrative of the golden age of Lebanon and its rich archaeological heritage as an attempt to legitimize their new project of development in the city center. The importance lies in the difference of memory between the merchants, the owners of the city, and Solidere, the imposed new owner of the city. As was mentioned in the introduction, in its publications, Solidere takes authority over the memory of the old city center by posing itself as the legitimate guardian of memory and history – through reconstruction – and by speaking of the memory and heritage of the old city center in a similar way that merchants would. The

same themes of memories that merchants invoke of the center are also used by Solidere - that it is meeting place for all people, and a place that promoted local trade and commerce while grounded in the centuries old history of the city. As such the issue becomes one of a war of memory over the city centre. While Solidere claims the space to be authentic, and the reconstruction project to be one in which the city is revived and restored, the actual use of the space in the present day tells a difference story in stark contrast to the memories of the space told by the daily users of the space, the merchants.

These memories of the past serve as a way to counter the hegemonic discourse of those in power, and a way to claim the right to the city and the right to remembering the history of the place. It is through these memories that the social history of space is recounted, not through the official discourse. Particular memories revolve around the socially and religiously mixed character of the old Beirut, especially around the area of the souqs. This is an important point that is emphasized repeatedly by all merchants I spoke to, that there was no sectarianism, that people used to “love each other” and there was no difference between Muslims and Christians in the center. And since the center is highly symbolic of Lebanon, this emphasis on unity is also descriptive of what Lebanon was at the time. Omar in particular repeatedly highlights the religion of the people of whom he refers to in a story, in doing so he is emphasizing what he sees as a radical difference between the old Lebanon and the new, and also importantly emphasizes the national significance of the old city center. The center, as it served as a meeting place for all the sects and classes, was necessary in maintaining this atmosphere of national unity. Upon its destruction, this unity no longer exists, and cannot exist, lending legitimacy to the old center as the “real” center and heart of the country.

“Old Beirut was all souqs they were very beautiful. It was a mix of all the sects, there were Muslims and Christians, there wasn’t Sunni and Shiite, there wasn’t even Christian Muslim [differences]. All of us were Lebanese; there was love, values and ethics. For example, my store when I was a young man was in Weygand Street. Eh... We used to close during the Christian holidays and we used to close during the Muslim holidays, and then for example, on Christmas for instance, we used to go and celebrate with them, and on New Year’s Eve we used to laugh together and play together, we were young boys.

Also, in the past it was the traditional Beirut, now there is no longer traditional Beirut. For instance, in Souq Sursoq you used to find the popular souqs. It welcomes the rich and the poor.

For instance, Souq Sursoq, it was... middle class. Souq Ayass a bit higher class than the middle class. Souq el-Tawileh... [pause] Souq el-Tawileh, it was for the aristocratic class. Also the actors and actresses from Egypt, all of them used to come and [buy] from Beirut.” – Omar Lababidi.

Omar talks about the loss of what he sees as the traditional Beirut, one that had a place for all classes of the Lebanese public, and for all religious and social backgrounds. There is no doubt that those who speak of Beirut in the past are nostalgic and romanticize the city, nevertheless, what matters more is what the city meant to them, how it was not just a marketplace but a place where they had social lives and for Omar, a place where he grew up and maintained not just his social life but his livelihood. That Beirut which he remembers is the one that has been destroyed and changed by the Solidere reconstruction project. To remember and to recount one’s memory is to be able to claim a right to the city, a right that was taken away, and furthermore it serves as an opposition to the claims of Solidere in their marketing of the city.

Omar’s personal situation reflects the national situation that he constantly refers to. After his displacement from the old souqs, Omar was forced to open up a store in Hamra, an area adjacent to the city center, though a busy area itself, Omar’s store was located on a quiet side street, and his flow of customers was significantly different from the one he was used to in the old souqs. Omar moved multiple times since his initial

displacement from the city center, from Beirut to Abu Dhabi, from Abu Dhabi to a Hamra side street, then finally from that shop to a small one on the second floor of a building on Hamra Street. His movements around the city reflect a similar story that other merchants had to tell as well, being constantly forced to relocate their shops in different areas of the city when once they occupied the very center of it. This change in Omar's and others economic conditions, reflects the significant gap between Lebanese in the period after the war, with the deterioration of the middle class and high rise in prices, and the massive accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few.

As a result of the post-war political and economic structure, significant changes in the social and economic conditions of the Lebanese took place. As Omar repeatedly points out, there was a decline in the middle class, with wealth and power accumulating in the hands of the few, as well as a growth in the poor class. It is worth noting in detail the real changes in the economic conditions of the people, as they directly affected the merchant community of the old Beirut, and is a major factor in their memories of their lives before the civil war, and their suffering after the reconstruction. Traboulsi (2014) notes that these inequalities in the social classes resulted in the growth of upper class incomes by 4.8 per cent per annum, while the middle class incomes fell by 8.4 per cent per annum, as well as lower class incomes falling by 4.6 per cent per annum, which also resulted in a 35 percent rise of the proportion of families in poverty. Another important factor was the drastic decline of health services resulting in "no more than 30 percent of Lebanese possessing health insurance" (Traboulsi 2014: 31). Omar holds Rafic Hariri personally responsible for the destruction of the old Beirut and for the robbing the people of their wealth and livelihoods. He particularly focuses on the issue of the wealth that Hariri amassed at the cost of the Lebanese people. The focus on the person of Rafic



Hariri and the Hariri family in general is not simply Omar's manifestation of anger, rather it holds an alarming truth about the balance of power and wealth in the country.

Traboulsi (2014), refers to statistics published by *Executive Magazine*, a Lebanese financial publication, which state that:

“at least 48 percent of private wealth in Lebanon was concentrated in the hands of just 8900 individuals: 0.3 per cent of the adult population and a subgroup whose members have personal incomes of no less than one million dollars. This means that the rest of the population (i.e. 99.7 per cent) own less than 52 per cent of the wealth, which the Swiss bank estimated at 91 billion dollars. The richest six Lebanese individuals, who belong to just two families – Hariri and Mikati, whose combined wealth *Forbes* magazine estimates at 14 billion dollars – own 15 percent of the country's private wealth between them.” (Traboulsi 2014: 35).

“Martyrs square, it never used to close it was open 24 hours. In the commercial souks the people were like ants. For instance, let's say I'm from Ras Beirut and I want to go to Achrafieh, I would have to pass through Martyrs Square. I'd go from Ras Beirut to Martyrs Square to Achrafieh, to go to Nahr el Kalb, to Jounieh, it was the meeting place for all the sects.” – Omar Lababidi

It is continuously mentioned that the city center was a meeting place for all people from Lebanon's different sects and classes. These memories point to the rise in political sectarianism during and after the civil war, and the further solidification of sectarian identities and the sectarian system in the country. Accompanying this was the rise of Rafic Hariri in Beirut, and as a leader of the Sunni sect. This highlights a shift in power and control over the city from its traditional Sunni and Orthodox families to a non-Beirut who invaded the political and economic arena in the country. As such, Hariri symbolized a shift in control and power over Beirut, and also symbolized the further solidification of sectarian identities, such as the Sunni in this case. In post war Lebanon, the lines of sectarian identity and consequently political affiliation became much more entrenched. This new political and sectarian environment greatly shapes the

way that Omar contrasts life before the war to life now. It is the reason why the issue of sectarianism and its rise figures continuously and prominently in his memories as it does with the memories of all other merchants I spoke to, without exception. In remembering a non-sectarian past (greatly idealized for it was not as such), Omar is rejecting the highly sectarian present which went beyond personal lives and pervaded the economic, social and political life of all people.

“I used to have a store in Azariyeh, I bought it in 1953. There was a woman from Zahle called Souad Skaff, she was my employee, she was like my sister. I was a young lad. I used to take care of her, be protective over her, just like she was my sister. She used to have the key to my store, I swear to God almighty. Never, never, I never told her you’re Muslim... I used to go have dinner at their house, my wife used to go spend the whole day at their house. Shame, it’s shameful. But after the civil war is when this all happened and after that you know all the politicians are liars, in Lebanon they are all liars” – Omar Lababidi.

The situation of Lebanon in the post independence period mirrored other post colonial situations, one in which nations were reduced to their capital cities. All state institutions and consequently work and wealth were concentrated in the the capital city, and as a result there was a total neglect of the other parts of the country. This gave people of the capital city, cultural capital they were able to use, and through which they were at an advantageous position in the larger society. In terms of Beirut, this also made newcomers to the city, such as Shiites – who were not originally from Beirut - feel pride in being part of the city and proud of their affiliation with the city itself. This also reflects the belief in social mobility through hard work, and by virtue of being located in the hub of the country.

## Imagining the Lebanese National Identity

“This is Beirut, I have pictures. Martyr’s Square, the Azariyeh building, the Capitol building, pictures of Sami Solh, pictures for Mir Majid Arslan, how he used to have people in the *Burj*, they used to have parades for independence, the Lebanese army used to do a parade at Martyr’s Square, the *Burj* square. Also, when Riad el-Solh was imprisoned, he was imprisoned on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1943, and he came out on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1943, the Saraya, they had celebrations there, and Mir Majid Arslan, may he rest in peace, he was a hero. He wore boots all the way up and the trousers like this, and the *hatta*, and the English rifle like this, and the bullets like this. He was the minister of defense back then, Mir Majid Arslan. And then the country was easy, so easy, the people used to love each other. There was nothing! There was no foreigner.

There is nothing better than this country. *Bilādi wa in jarat ‘alayi ‘azizaton, wa ahli wa in shaḥu ‘alayi kirāmun* [Even if my country oppresses me, it is close to my heart, and even when my clan abandons me, they are dear to me]. There is nothing better than your nation, if you have no nation you have nothing. You have no honour, you have no existence, you have no conscience, you have nothing at all!” – Omar Lababidi

The old Beirut Souqs were the symbol for Lebanese national identity. In most conversations about the old souqs, people would assert that it “represents Lebanon,” it was the image of the “real” Lebanon, a city that was truly for all the people. In the process of talking about their displacement and struggle with Solidere, the speakers were prompted to reflect on what it is exactly that had been taken away from them, and why the old souqs were so important to them. They began to talk of their memories of the souqs, and from these memories emerges an idealized image of the city center, as a microcosm of the diversity of Lebanon. The presentation of the sequence of events are quite fragmented, and this is because the speakers’ memories and experiences are fragmented. Their stories begin at the point where they lost their property and livelihood, and this dramatic event then prompted them to reconstruct their memories of

the old Beirut, its character and meanings, and to contrast it with what is somehow a deficit of a “real” city in the present:

“A downtown area looks like the people, I mean you go there to find your needs. You need to buy a button you buy a button, you need to buy a shoe you buy a shoe, you need to buy a fish you buy a fish, so it looks like your needs, I mean. And people have shops to be providers for Lebanese needs. Now what we have is another type of area, it doesn’t represent the Lebanese needs. I mean it took me years before I go down to that area, whereas I used to be there the whole time...

It had life, it’s a dead area. All the buildings are empty. What you see uh... is what’s on the ground floor... you see people on the ground floor, these buildings are empty skulls.

People knew each other, people greeted each other. They shared their joys, their griefs, they worries... it had a soul [pause], it had, it was very special, because, it wasn’t Muslim or Christian area, it was an area, a Lebanese area, where you’d see people from everywhere. You’d see from the Beqaa, from the North, from the South, and everyone would meet regardless of where they come from. It’s what they brought in that was important to this downtown area, not where they came from.” – Leila Dimashqiyeh (Rights Holder).

Leila’s description of the souqs of Beirut highlights an interesting example of the different meanings that a space could have, and how the meaning is created by the diversity of people that inhabit it and use it in multiple ways. In this instance, Leila is describing the souqs as a meeting place of different people, from different religious and class backgrounds. For her, this difference was representative of the sectarian and class diversity of the whole Lebanon, a diversity that was not at all problematic, but rather enriching. Leila also presents an image of the old souqs as a community of people that didn’t just meet at the center, but knew each other well and shared their lives, their happiness and sadness. In such descriptions, the souqs and the city center in general begin to appear as having an identity of their own. The stories that the speakers chose to

tell portrayed the souqs as embodying an ideal, peaceful, and tolerant Lebanese identity. While I had initially expected that I would hear about an identity or character of the souqs and center that was particular to it, I ended up being told about the ultra national identity of the souqs. Although this narrative of the souqs may be over-idealized, for the speakers at least, it remains to be a truth, as Portelli states, “The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge” (Portelli 1991, 51).

The similar memories of different people and the similar words and phrases that were repeated by many, about the Lebanese identity of the old Beirut Souqs, and the mixed sectarian and class backgrounds of people, and the mutual love and family belonging of the old souqs, are indicative of the collective memory elicited by this space. This also lends legitimacy to the idea of a collective identity represented by the people of the souqs in particular. The collective identity referred to doesn't mean the homogeneity of the souqs or the similarities of the people. Rather, the collective identity is in this case a collectivity of difference and diversity, a collectivity of purpose and a collective identification with the souqs as representative of the heritage of Beirut, and of Lebanon.

Though Omar and others repeatedly refer to the old Beirut center as one that encompassed all Lebanese classes and sects, it presents an idealized image of a city that was in many ways exclusive. Though the city center was frequented by people as consumers, not everyone had access to the city the way Beirutis did, and this is what allowed them to feel as they were the legitimate owners of the city. One of the speakers being a Shiite from South Lebanon insisted that he felt he was from Beirut since he was born and raised there and worked there. His status as a trader in the city center gives

him the right to claim the city and his personal experience was one that reflected this ideal of Beirut. However, his narrative stands in contrast to others such as Omar's who continuously stress that Beirut is for Beirutis, used by all, but claimed by them. And this way of thinking of Beirut influences the way they remember all that happened during the civil war and after as focused almost exclusively on the city and its centre. This narrative of Beirut is one that they tell, and which centers all of the country's history in that location, with nothing going on beyond the city, and the heart to be more precise. This was further solidified as the civil war happened to the greatest extent within the city, and the particular the green line that ran through its center becoming infamous for dividing the Christian East from the Muslim West towards the later years of the war with the sharp rise in sectarian identity. Beirut became a symbol for everything that happened in the country.

In addition, the merchants of the old Beirut Souqs were referred to as a family, a large but close-knit community.

“You know for instance the Mir Majid Arslan, used to sit at the door of his store, Gebran Metni used to tell him, “look Amir I have four children.” He'd tell him “no you have three, and he'd reply, no, Omar Lababidi is my son.” I used to go into his store when I was a young man, when I used to get new merchandise he would loan me 100 liras or 200 liras and he would call out to his sons “come come give him 200 liras this is your brother”. *Eh wallah...* I used to go to his home and sit on his dining table [to mean that he was part of the family, he shares their meals]. Really, really, there was no difference. When I went to the Gulf and I came back, I came and saw him in a store which is now in Saydeh. God bless you Gebran Metni, there was no one better than him. He kissed me and started crying.” – Omar Lababidi.

Though the speakers continuously refer to the equality and community of people from diverse backgrounds, they nevertheless always refer to this difference, they always

make it a point to point out that this person here was Muslim, this a Christian, this poor, the other rich, and so on. This is not to say that therefore the statements of unity were contradictory, but rather to show that indeed the space was for almost all segments of the Lebanese population, and that the diversity that today always raises fear of violence and clashes, was the same diversity that was at the core of the richness of the city. All the merchants I spoke to repeated the same thing; that the souqs were like a community of families, where people grew up together and treated each other like family beyond the work place. The life in the souqs included both the public and the private, store owners were ‘brothers and sisters’ not just neighbors.

“In terms of history if you want to talk about history it used to unite, well besides the fact that it united, the commercial center used to bring together people from all over the world. So for instance now if I travelled to Turkey or to Spain or to Italy or to Syria or to any country where its known they have Souqs, just like in Syria there is the silk souq, the fabric souq, the plastic souq, in Beirut it was the same, everything had its own souq and people used to go there specifically for that. As you had said earlier there was there Fish Souq the Meat Souq, Souq el W’iyeh, like the one we worked in, Souq Sursoq, Souq el-Tawileh, the Gold Souq, and so on and so forth. They used to come from the ends of the north and the ends of the south, one used to go down [to the centre] knowing that he was going to the souqs. Well now where are the souqs that used to unite all people and used to unite all Lebanese?

Back then, you know maybe, personally, I learnt different languages from being in the souqs more than from studying, other people spoke seven languages and they were peddlers, they weren’t educated, most of all, these ships used to come to the port bringing people that came to do their shopping, like people from Russia, from Armenia, from Egypt, from all the countries. For instance, I’ll talk to you about my own store, the Armenian was a customer, the English man the French man, so we were forced to speak [with them] and that way we learnt the language. Other people used to know how to speak seven languages, where do you think they learnt it from? Also from the people who used to come to the souqs. Back in the days during the holidays, I mean international holidays not just in Lebanon, they used to hang the flags of each country respectively during their holidays in Lebanon because there were so many people who used to come from other countries, these were nice

times. (Clears throat) I mean what can I tell you. Every country brought its customers to Beirut.” - Mahmoud Mansour (Souq el-W'iyeh)

While religious unity was the predominant theme highlighted by merchants, another important aspect of the city center that was spoken about was that it was a meeting place for different classes. Souqs ranged from those carrying expensive and luxurious items such as Souq el-Tawileh and Weygand Street, to the popular souqs such as Souq Sursoq. What was most important was the accessibility of the city center to all classes of Lebanese and foreigners. It was something to take pride in and something that also reflects the condition of Lebanon at the time. The mention of class differences highlighted the different standard of living and quality of life in comparison to the present time. For instance, while poverty still existed, it was not the same degree of poverty that one would witness today, poverty was not harsh. A trader from the Fish Souq I spoke to told me not to think that poverty didn't exist, it did, and he himself was poor, but being poor never meant being destitute, one could still maintain a comfortable living and be happy. The old Beirut Souqs were described as simple, and life in general was described as simple, when healthcare was accessible to all, and people weren't "hungry" as they are now:

“There was over there as well a public restroom, eh, a public restroom. The person who was looking over it (managing it), he had a Volkswagen, a Volkswagen car, and he used to wash the bathrooms, and on Sundays he would get in his car and go. There was no poverty. The poor man was living, living a good life. For this reason as well, there was no, there was no lack of values. A young man would marry at the age of 20, 22, find a house, a simple house for 10,000 dollars, liras, 7000... he would rent. Nowadays 2 million, if you don't have 200,000 or 300,000 you won't find an apartment. Eh, they were living, the poor man was living better than now. There was no poverty, there was a class, from the Lebanese population there was 7 or 8 % that were poor, but they were living. And 60-70-80% were the middle class. These were living a good life. For



instance, they used to go to summer homes (in the mountains), from the Muslim community, they used to spend the summer in Araya, Chbeniyeh, Ba'l Shmay, Bhamdoun, they would spend their summer vacations there. And our loved ones the Christians would go to Brumana, Beit Meri, also to spend the summer there. Life was nice. Now you can't, you can't go spend the summer somewhere.” - Omar Lababidi.

The civil war and the consequent reconstruction brought about the destruction of the middle class. While those who were rich only increased their wealth, the poor got poorer and the middle class pushed to the margins of poverty.

In many ways, remembering becomes a way of telling history and documenting it against the story that Solidere seeks to tell in its architecture and its reconstruction process. In places like Solidere's Beirut Central District, a particular form of national heritage was chosen and preserved in “sites” that exclude active memory of the space. Sites of memory are the places where memory is made tangible and historically relevant as opposed to places that invoke memory or spontaneous memory. In such cases what is supposedly historically important has been preserved and remembered for us. The dominance of these sites and their history, begs a rethinking about memory, the memory that is social, the spontaneous memory that is more volatile and changing (Nora 1989). Remembering is an active process and it can have as strong a purpose as does the authority of history. With merchants of the old souqs, there is an active remembering when telling of their lives in the souqs, and this serves the purpose of countering the Solidere narrative of reconstruction, and of national history.

Therefore, memories are not only testaments; they can be acts of opposition to that which is considered official and authoritative. In the case of Solidere's reconstruction of Beirut, the historic buildings that were preserved are supposed to become sites of memory, monuments that are de-contextualized and are just

representations of something past. Stripped of their social context, these monuments serve to remind those who have memories, of their loss, and for new consumers of the space, they are nothing but monuments of the past that might provide some sort of cultural and historical authenticity. With the case of Beirutis in opposition to Solidere, spontaneous and individual memory is necessary and deliberate. This is the memory that comes up in conversations about the city center, in visits to the city center, and in memories of the war and the people's loss of their public space. These memories come in opposition to Solidere's reconstruction and its selective history of the space of the Beirut Souqs.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DEALING WITH DISPLACEMENT – THE STRUGGLE WITH SOLIDERE

“He just likes money more than any other person. No ethics, no values. God killed him, and got rid of him. Beirut killed Rafic el Hariri because he oppressed. One hundred and thirty thousand Beirut families were kicked out of their properties. If you want, I will take you to a man, he is paralyzed, and sitting in a car. And another man, my dear, he goes down every day to the *Burj* and he cries and cries and cries - crying over what used to be his. Eh... many of them have died, many of them are employees, many of them are drivers. Take me for example, I taught my children to be able to take over my stores. Now they are in the Gulf. Three of them are in the Gulf. And the three of them, they're barely eating and drinking and paying rent. They call me, I call them. They cry, I cry. This is our life. *Ya di'ānik ya Beirut.*” - Omar Lababidi.

Displacement happened twice for the Rights Holders in the old Beirut Souqs. In the first instance of displacement, people were forcibly displaced by the war and the heavy fighting that took place across the city center. This first displacement occurred only a couple of years after the war started in 1975, when it became no longer safe to remain in the center. Some people were able to take their belongings with them and clear out their stores, others fled leaving everything behind and eventually all their belongings either got looted or were lost in the rubble. The second instance of displacement was the displacement by the Solidere reconstruction project. I categorize these as two phases of displacement because they were the result of two different events, and had different effects on those displaced. The civil war displacement was barely mentioned by the people I spoke to. It was seen as an uncontrollable reality and while it was the beginning of a drastic change in their lives, it wasn't spoken of as a reason for their loss and suffering.

The second displacement by Solidere on the other hand, is the trigger for the stories of suffering, loss, and oppression. It is because people had the hope and promise of coming back and restoring their lives that the quick loss of their property became a terrible blow. This forced displacement could be traced back to someone, there was, for the people, a clear perpetrator, Solidere and Rafic Hariri. As such, in the life story of Omar Lababidi, and the experience of displacement by the reconstruction, Solidere and Rafic Hariri personally are the central focus of the story telling, and necessary to understand the rise of Rafic Hariri in relation to Beirutis, and the tangible effects he and Solidere had, and continue to have on their lives. In this chapter I will ask, how did the second displacement through the reconstruction project, become a physical suffering? What does the personal struggle of Omar reveal about the changing role of Beirutis in general and merchants in particular with regards to their city? And how is Omar's story with Rafic Hariri symbolic of the nature of the power of Rafic Hariri and Solidere?

### **On Health, Suffering, and the Loss of Livelihood**

Omar Lababidi, at the time of this writing, has a men's clothing shop on Hamra Street. As mentioned in the introduction, this particular shop was previously used as the storehouse for his merchandise, while his shop was located on one of Hamra's side streets. However, he had to close that shop because he could no longer afford to pay the rent. He moved to the shop on Hamra Street, which is located in the second floor of a dark building with no sign. It is hard to find, unless you intend it. It is important to tell of Omar's situation in the present, as contrasted with the life he had before the reconstruction. Omar's story, when told to me, began with the moment of reconstruction

and of loss. In fact, this was the first impression anyone would get of Omar just by seeing the sign that used to be posted on his old shop in Hamra:

‘They raped Beirut’, ‘Give us back what is rightfully ours!’

The loss of his property and of his life had a negative effect not just on his personal life, but also in his health. Omar suffered from a heart attack when he was on the *Al Jadeed* television show, *Al Fasad* or Corruption. In the midst of his anger and outburst against Rafic Hariri during the show, Omar suffered a heart attack, and consequently suffered the consequences of inadequate healthcare coverage. It is an incident he has told me about more than once, the deterioration of his health, and the embarrassment he was forced to feel because of costly healthcare, which he could not afford. He speaks in detail about the ordeal he had at the hospital, trying to secure the money needed for his treatment.

“...Other friends also contacted me, I told them ‘no thanks it’s ok, God will help me’. So you know my wife told me we have an apartment in a building, I told her go mortgage the house, just at least so we can pay the hospital bills so we can come out clean so we won’t be disgraced. It’s the most important thing *ya amo* to come out with dignity, to have self-pride. She said alright, she went to the French Lebanese Bank. So she told them that we need around 7,000 to 8,000 dollars for the hospital and they gave us the interest rate that we had to pay back. I told her it’s way too much, but she said what can we do? So we asked the hospital administration if they would allow us to pay only half the bill [chuckles], they laughed at us. They said, what is this? Eh... you have to pay the whole bill. The bill turned out to be 15 million Lebanese Lira. We told them, alright, as you demand. But then the administrator told us, come let me tell you, the bill has already been paid. [pause] Well who paid the bill? He told us the person who paid wishes to be anonymous. So I told him I can’t accept this, I’m going to pay the bill, please give him back his money. He said no he will take offence and I told him sorry I can’t accept, please tell me who he is. After going back and forth, arguing even yelling, you know I need to know who! He told me it was Sayed

Hassan Nasrallah, he saw you on TV. You know, I don't know him, he doesn't know me, I'm a Muslim Sunni he's a Muslim Shiite. Anyway, the man told me he saw you on TV and he wanted to help. [Pause] They paid 15 million Lebanese Lira, may God bless him. This is... I've never seen him before, he's never seen me, I don't know him, he doesn't know me, and all he said was, "tell him May God grant him health and he shouldn't be stressed anymore, what is gone is gone." This is my story. So what can you tell me?"

The story of Omar's health crisis sheds further light on the responsibility put on Rafic Hariri for the deterioration of his health and his personal suffering. He blames Hariri for causing his heart attack because of all the sadness and suffering he caused him. It is significant that *Al Jadeed*, a Lebanese television network is seen as a rival to Hariri and the news media controlled by him, namely *Future Television* station. In the time when that Omar needed to be treated and taken care of, he makes it a point to show that he refused the help of many who offered before, as he said it was a matter of dignity and pride, however, finally his problem was solved by Hassan Nasrallah, of a political and social group drastically different from the ones that Omar previously had relied on and maintained relations with. Being a Sunni Beirut helped by a Shia from the South marks a transformation in Omar's condition. While Omar points out this details to stress the point that there is no "difference" between Sunnis and Shiites, he is nevertheless making that very distinction and publicly saying that he was now being helped *because* of the loss he suffered, and not, as before, because of his position as a Beirut and a trader. Omar's connection to politicians such as Hassan Nasrallah who he did not know but nevertheless was connected to again highlights his connection to elites in the city and in the country. It is also significant because Hassan Nasrallah is seen as a rival to Hariri and his project.

On following occasions, two years later, Omar, and his wife whom I met in the store, repeated this story to me. Omar had by then suffered more problems with his health, one of the operations he had to undergo was during the week that I was resuming my interviews with him. His health, although also due to age, was symbolically connected to his displacement from the city centre. His inability to properly secure his health care, and the ordeal he goes through on visits to the hospital where he has to pay expensive bills, is due to the fact that his financial situation greatly deteriorated since he lost his shop in the old Beirut Souqs. The issues of health and health care coverage, was brought up by others merchants as well, the lack of government support, the inability to provide for themselves, is seen to be directly related to their loss of livelihood.

There was a drastic change in the lives of the merchants in the commercial souqs as a result of the reconstruction project. They went from being shop owners, and by extension, owners of the city center, to being traders displaced to the margins of the city. Their loss was material, social and personal, psychological and emotional. Their trades dwindled, where they were dispersed they could no longer have the same standard of trader and flow of customers, they became unknown, when previously they were intended by all who went to the city. This loss also manifested itself in the ability to care for themselves and their families. As with Omar's case, he went from being a successful trader with an expanding business to not being able to afford his healthcare.

### **Solidere Personified – The Struggle with Rafic Hariri**

“I’m going to tell you in all honesty [raised voice] Hariri came as a nakba for Lebanon, broadcast my story, a nakba! I met with him more than twenty times, he told me, Beirut, I’m going to put it back as it used to be. Now if you go to Damascus, they have a heritage in Damascus. There is Souq el-Hamidiyyeh. Go to Egypt, there is [souk el] Muski,

there are things. You have, go to Turkey, there are souks with heritage. Over here, Beirut's heritage is gone. Have you in your life ever heard, with my respect to all religions, the great mosque with a bar next to it? Now in Solidere the great mosque has a bar next to it. Eh... in Bab Idriss there is a mosque called the Saraya, behind it there are bars. Is this permissible? No it is not. This is Beirut. All the ethics and values are gone from Beirut. There is no longer any Beirut [in a depressed voice]. *Ya di'ānik ya Beirut.* Beirut's heritage is all gone. The manners of Beirut have all gone." - Omar Lababidi.

The loss of morality, ethics and values that Omar mentions repeatedly is connected to a loss of a system in which people, the elderly and the sick were secured and taken care of. In lamenting this loss, Omar refers to the present system in which the state is largely absent in the service and care of its citizens, and where even healthcare has become a luxury for the few instead of a right for all. In this there is again a direct cause for the suffering which is Hariri. In the post war period when Hariri came to power, a neoliberalization project began to be implemented; the reconstruction project was an essential part of it. In this system, healthcare was one of the services severely affected, with a decrease in the amount of people having health insurance, which became a maximum of 30 per cent, as mentioned in the previous chapter (Traboulsi 2014: 31). With the privatization of healthcare, there was an increase in health insurance coverage by private companies while social security declined, leaving a significant part of the population without health coverage. Solidere and Rafic Hariri in particular were present in all the stories that Omar Lababidi told. Whether he was talking about a childhood memory, or about work in one of his stores, or about his family, memories were always interjected with the mention of Rafic Hariri and the injustice he had personally caused Omar. Unlike most of the rights holders, Omar was able to meet with Rafic Hariri personally on a number of occasions. He was personally called to meet him at a time, he said, when Hariri was meeting with a number of Beirutis in 1996:



“I went to his house. His house was in Koreitem, and I told him, Your Excellency Mr. President, you came and took my property, I spoke to him with no inhibitions, he told me, ‘my brother I don’t know what the story is, give me your telephone number... I will call you’. And I gave him my phone number, and after a week the man called me, may god have mercy on him now, at the time Husni Al Majzoub used to manage his affairs, he was in the Saraya in Sanayeh, the big place, yes, the big palace, my dear, so I went to him, I had papers from Solidere, it was not included [in the plan], how did you include it? They told me, it was by mistake, “I will give you if you want a property to own or money”, I told him no I want a store, he told me okay, after we wanted to go out and I wanted to leave, we paused, he asked me how are you in Tareek Al Jdeedi, I have a house in Tareek al-Jdeedeh, I told him, why you want to run for election? I am willing to help you. I made T-shirts and put his picture on them, I participated with him in the elections on the assumption that he would give me a store, in the end, because of how much I went back and forth to him, he got Maher Baydoun and told them give him a store down. Maher, Mr. Maher Baydoun, told me I am preparing a shop, and next week and the week after and the week after that, and the person who was witness to this, the MP, may God give him a long life, he’s a gentleman, Michel Pharoun, and he told them, you have to give him a store and up until now I haven’t received not a store, not anything.

I met with him 20 times. I helped him during the elections. I printed 5000 t-shirts for him. I opened up my house to him, in Tareeq al-Jdeedeh. And with us was Omar el Zein, he was in charge of the electoral campaign. And I took him to a man called Youssef Shuqayr, we opened up an office in Achrafieh. It’s all lies, lies. Spending, spending. He just likes money more than any other person. No ethics, no values. God killed him, and got rid of him. Beirut killed Rafic Hariri because he oppressed. One hundred and thirty thousand Beirut families were kicked out of their properties. If you want, I will take you to a man, he is paralyzed, and sitting in a car. And another man, my dear, he goes down every day to the *Burj* and he cries and cries and cries - crying over what used to be his. Eh... many of them have died, many of them are employees, many of them are drivers. Take me for example, I taught my kids to be able to take over my stores. Now they are in the gulf. Three of them are in the Gulf. And the three of them, they’re barely eating and drinking and paying rent. They call me, I call them. They cry, I cry. This is our life. *Ya di‘ānik ya Beirut.*” - Omar Lababidi.

Omar developed a relationship with Rafic Hariri, as a Beirut, and based on Hariri’s need for him electorally, and his own hope that he would be compensated

personally by Hariri. Omar explains how he helped and stood by Hariri, and to some degree trusted him, and his promise of compensating him with a store in the city centre. As such, he helped him in his electoral campaign, and “opened up his home” to him, as he says, only to gain nothing in return. Omar believes, as he has mentioned many times, in the personal relationships between people and their representatives. He mentions many times the simplicity and ease with which he used to be able (like other Lebanese) to contact leaders and ask requests of them. As such it is not surprising that Omar was able to meet with Hariri and other government members, such as Fouad Sanyoura at the time, as part of his struggle to gain back at least part of his rights to the city centre. The absolute inability to receive what he was promised by Rafic Hariri, in part led to the deterioration of not only of his livelihood but also importantly of his family life.

“Now here we come back to one thing, it’s a familial destruction and I want to record it. I came home, my wife asked me where are your documents. I told her I left them with Rafic Hariri, he wants to give me a store. She told me how can you give him the original documents? Give him something else. One word from her, one word from me. A long argument. How are we supposed to live? We have children, how are we supposed to live? I don’t want to stay with you anymore, divorce me. So there was a divorce. So there was divorce and I have four children. She left and she went to Abu Dhabi, because I couldn’t provide for her, I couldn’t feed her. I couldn’t let her live the way I used to. This is my story with Rafic Hariri. He who doesn’t fear God, he didn’t fear God, now God is massacring him, God is burning him in the fires of hell. And let Saad Hariri know, he went and gave away the properties of the people of Beirut, let him give them back. Why did he destroy them? He ruined my home.” – Omar Lababidi.

Omar’s struggle for his property and for his life is a unique story. Unlike many other merchants, he used to firmly believe that one day he would get back his rights, and that he must keep struggling and fighting for his rights. At numerous instances during our conversations, he would show me official documents from political figures and

from the office of Rafic Hariri, stating that he is Rights Holder, giving promises, statements that never materialized. He also made told me of how public he was about his injustice, always contacting the media and political figures, always trying to get his story out even if he wasn't able to get anything in return he believed that he always needed to be public and to contact politicians and visit leaders in the country.

Much has changed in Omar's attitude from our first meetings in 2010, to the present. Previously, Omar used to insist on being vocal against Hariri and the reconstruction project. He insisted that justice would always be served and that his right would be returned. It is perhaps for this reason, the unwillingness to give up on regaining his right, that Omar was so public about his story and about the plight of the rights owners. However this year, Omar declared that he had no hope. "What is gone is gone". Age and health have taken a toll on Omar, he is no longer able to fight for anything, and even at the age of 81, he still comes to work every day, when ideally he would be retired. For Omar, this is the ultimate blow by the reconstruction project, and the most important difference of how he would have imagined his life to be. Had he still been in the centre, he tells me, the primary difference would be that by now he would be comfortably retired, and not constantly working.

I found it necessary to focus on Omar's story for many reasons. Firstly, he asked me to, telling me, "I want to thank you for your visit and I'm begging you please don't cut out a single word that I said it's my responsibility." Secondly, it is evident that Omar relives his pain every day, he talks about his personal struggle with Rafic Hariri in detail, he talks about the ways in which his home was disrupted, he talks in detail about his deteriorating health, which he blames on the stress in his life, and he is very public about his hate for Rafic el Hariri and about the pleas for vengeance. His frustration

blows over every time he begins to describe the ways in which he was deceived and robbed by Rafic Hariri. Even in his narration, at numerous points he stops telling me the story and begins talking *to* Rafic Hariri, speaking of the past as if it were happening again right then and there. Omar's suffering, and perhaps the suffering of others, is continuous. It shapes his memory of the souqs, always bringing him to smile and chuckle as he remembers "the good old days," and it brings tears to his eyes and anger in his voice every time he talks of his struggle. Though the time has passed and the space is gone, the meaning that the places had, and their accompanying emotions still remain.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION: LIVING WITH LOSS, RESISTING

#### SOLIDERE

This thesis has attempted to tell the story of the old Beirut Souqs and their loss through the life story of a Beirut merchant, Omar Lababidi. Memories are an important form of resistance for people who have lost everything, yet continue to struggle and persevere. While memory plays an important part in the daily struggle against the hegemonic counter memory of Solidere, other direct forms of resistance also form a part of the lives of the merchants on the old Beirut Souqs. Though Omar struggled with Rafic Hariri on a personal level, he was also involved in a wider struggle against the Solidere reconstruction project in his membership to the Association of Property Rights Holders of the Beirut Central District (Rights Holders).

This is an important part of the struggle against Solidere, as most of the writings on the destruction and reconstruction of the city center focus on the uses of memories in laying claim to spaces and making them authentic, but paying little attention to the concrete legal claims that people have in the city center. In the legal struggle against Solidere, the most prominent collective group of Rights Holders are the Association, who symbolize concrete, legal and continued resistance to the reconstruction project. This is indeed an important factor to consider. While it is definitely useful to remember and document what the city used to be like, it is misleading to write about the reconstruction project as inevitable, because up until present day there is continued action against the company and against the project as a whole.

## **Fighting Back: The Rights Holders of the Beirut Central District**

In my first meeting with Omar, he introduced me to the Association, and put me in touch with its president and its secretary. Omar and then the members of the association told me about the formation of their group with the onset of the creation of Solidere. Directly after the Solidere was created and introduced to the public, a group of property owners mobilized and formed a group, which became known as the Association for Property Rights Holders of the Beirut Central District. This association, which became the main organ from the beginning to fight back the actions of Solidere, was formed in October of 1991 when two separate groups in opposition to Solidere joined forces to become one. The formation of this group took place solely because of peoples growing concerns for their property and their rights upon hearing of the plan for the creation of Solidere. The head of the group was Omar Daouk, one of the major property rights owners in the area, who had a good standing in Beiruti society. From the onset, Daouk was able to use his public relations to know about the intricacies of Solidere's plan, which was not released to the public. After his death in 1997, his wife Rayya Daouk was appointed in his place. The first few years of the Association's life were the most active, where they mobilized to garner large support and where their public appearances against Solidere happened on an almost weekly basis. Although it had been hard to stop Solidere and the development of the new Central District since the very beginning, activism never stopped. The Committee remains until this very, the main (and perhaps the only) association that is still struggling for the Rights Owners of the city center. Samir Haddad, a member of the steering committee of the association

tells me how the committee actually began in the face of an ambiguous situation regarding Solidere and the reconstruction project:

“...when the project was announced, it wasn't announced in details, it was like we are coming, we are the group of Hariri, or Mr. Hariri has a big plan for Beirut [pause] he wants to rebuild Beirut, he wants to put from his money to do it, and he is preparing plans that will be published soon and then in June, when the plans were published, really a big splash was made, a news splash was made. The plans, and the drawings, there were plans and drawings, all these were drawings actually. Yes well these drawings [pause] these drawings were uh made in a calendar. In a 12-month calendar of future randomings, future randomings of Beirut, were made in a calendar of 12-months maybe the calendar of 1992. They were uh distributed in June or July of 1991 if I remember... but in order to have a pretext to distribute these photos to as many people as possible, so that the people can look at this color drawing and umm [pause], that's what was given to the public at the time. And beautiful and color drawings and [pause] and that's why the ordinary person didn't grasp what's, what's going to happen. Only the people influential like uh Mr. Daouk or... could maybe ask friends uh around Hariri, “what is this project?” “What's going to happen?” And the explanation came. A company, a real estate company covering all of the downtown where everybody all the right owners will become share holders and then you and the shareholders will get shares. At that time that's why the big-shots in society got the news better, got the information quicker than the others and started mobilizing.” – Samir Haddad.

The committee is made up of an 8-member steering committee and previously had around 500 to 600 members. However, as many of the rights owners have passed away and some of its members have not renewed their membership, the committee is currently made up of 300 registered members, with around 600 supporters. The core 300 which make up the membership are very loyal to the committee; they are in close, constant contact with it and with each other. The members still have close connections to one another, particularly those who had worked together in the same souq. Samir Haddad mentioned that even if they didn't see each other often, they did see each other on occasion – particularly in the case of a death of a member, when all would come to

pay their respects. The core members also actively participate in all the rallies and other events that the committee organizes, and consult the committee regularly on issues that have to do with their property in the old Beirut Souqs.

Omar and other merchants I spoke to had an ambiguous relationship with the Association. In a large part, this is due to the amount of time that has passed since the reconstruction first began, along with the individual hardships that merchants had to deal with as a result of their displacement. In the initial years of the reconstruction project and the formation of the association, Omar, like others, was active in the organization. Omar asserts that the association tried their best, they organized and they worked. He participated in meetings, particularly remembering the gatherings would take place at the St. George Hotel. However, participation waned as the years passed and the merchants grew older. While the form of actions that were being taken were significant for the association, for individual members like Omar, there was little tangible evidence of gains. Symbolically the struggle of the Association was important, practically it had little effect on the merchants.

The initiatives that the committee took and activities it organized from its inception ranged from legal measures, to suing Solidere, to organizing bi-yearly rallies during the initial phase (which have slowly dwindled down to once a year now). In addition their weekly to bi-weekly press releases (and if need be, press conferences), they are closely following and criticizing every new development that is undertaken by Solidere. The Association intimately follows every development by Solidere, and is quick to bring to light all actions that are seen as unjust or illegal.<sup>9</sup> One such case dates back to December 2005 when Solidere was allowed to extend its lifespan for ten more

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<sup>9</sup> Documents of the Association of Property Rights Holders.



years and expand its work internationally. The Rights Holders staged a protest, stating that giving Solidere the right to expand goes beyond its mandate and would jeopardize the Shareholders' stakes in the company. In addition to this, they questioned whether Solidere had even succeeded in completing its job in the Beirut Central District, and in giving justice to the right holders (Abu Zaki 2007). Perhaps one of the most active moves by the committee is the creation of a 'phase-out' plan for Solidere, which aims at developing a body that can take over when Solidere's time is over. These plans have been readjusted every year, closely following every development by Solidere.<sup>10</sup> These actions are quite significant because they show continued commitment in opposition to Solidere, no matter the extent of development and actions that have already been executed. Their strategies are based on the knowledge that their struggle will be a very long-term struggle. It is important to mention that the committee has never once met with Rafic Hariri, as he refused their requests numerous times. In addition, the committee lobbied very strongly with the Lebanese politicians, and religious leaders, but save a very small minority, were not able to get any support, as most of the people had already been 'bought' by Rafic Hariri.

Omar worked in the different vein than the Association did. Like the Daouks, Omar Lababidi also came from a famous Beirut family, and while other merchants did not have relations or connections with politicians, Omar did. He constantly aimed to get the attention and support of political figures that he has access to, including but not exclusively, Rafic Hariri, as has been discussed. Omar highlights that perhaps there might be among some a feeling of inadequacy of the committee. He talks about how although he is a dedicated member, he nevertheless feels that sometimes the struggle is

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<sup>10</sup> Documents of the Association of Property Rights Holders.

going nowhere, and he takes matters into his own hands. He also made it clear of how public he was about his injustice, always contacting the media and political figures, and always trying to get his story out even if he wasn't able to get anything in return. He believed that he always needed to be public and to contact politicians and visit leaders in the country, stating that this is a point of divergence from his personal struggle and that of the Association. Omar points out that although the committee works hard, they cannot feel his pain, because they are still comfortable, whereas he was reduced to poverty. For him that was the ultimate difference in their experiences and that is what drives him to take matters into his own hands.

The Beirut city center has become like many other global cities, focusing on economic development and tourism. Consequently, the city center no longer has the social networks it used to have, and the space no longer holds meaning for those who used to use it and live in it. This was most evident during the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon. During this time, there were over 700,000 internal refugees, many of whom took shelter in various parts of Beirut. Schools and homes and other public and private spaces were used to accommodate people in areas very close to the central district, but the city center itself was devoid of people and social activity. During and after the war, areas such as Hamra, Verdun, and Monot flourished with activism and social activities, overshadowing the city center as the supposed heart of the city. Since then Hamra Street, located only two streets from the Central District, flourished. Businesses, such as restaurants, soon realized that the Central District was not a sustainable area for work. Areas such as Hamra and Verdun proved to be real neighborhoods and hence better for business. Just before the war it was bubbling with life; once the war started it felt like it was no longer a city for the Lebanese. This showed that the center, once tourists left,

became completely empty and socially insignificant; it was no longer of any use, and proved to have lost the meanings it once used to have for the people of Beirut and Lebanon.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The research I carried out, the stories I was able to hear and the information I was capable of gathering reinforced my conviction that the use of oral history methodology would be a unique way to be able to hear and write about the reconstruction of the city center from the perspective of those who grew up there and lived there and made their homes, lives, and friendships there. The stories I heard and wrote illuminated the less talked about, and more personal struggle of the merchants and property owners of the city center. Their narratives showed in detail their painful experience of displacement and of what they refer to as the robbery of their rights. It showed the deep sense of community, belonging and even family that the people of the souqs had with one another. Their stories also revealed a great sense of pride in their identity as *the people* of the old Beirut, and also pride in their national Lebanese identity which they believed and remembered has having been embodied in the people and character of the old Beirut.

The stories of the speakers were told as they remembered them, and were written in the same sequence that they reflected. The story began with moment of displacement and provoked a remembrance of what they had been displaced from and what they had lost. Following this, they would delve into telling me about the old souks and particular memories that they had of them, in addition to some personal and other more general

descriptions of the souks. This finally led to telling about their current situation, after the displacement in the context of the continuing developments of Solidere. Of course, the stories were triggered by my questions, but to a large degree, the storytelling took its own course, and during the interview I would only few times say something or ask direct questions. The method I used proved to be very useful for the research, as I was able to have access to more detailed data about the project that I had initially not been able to find in material written about the topic. The most fruitful was the information of the Rights Holders Committee, which except in the press, there was no information about. Most important of all were the human stories that I was able to record, as these were largely missing from all the other documents and articles I was able to gather.

The transcription of the interviews was perhaps the part where I had the most difficulties and worries. The very act of transcribing directly distorts the information and the ‘oral story,’ for it is no longer really an oral story once it has been written down by the researcher. In transcribing the interviews I felt that much of the meanings and feelings, and all of the expressions and motions and their meanings were lost. In particular, when I was translating from Arabic to English, I found the process challenging because so many of the expressions in Arabic would completely lose their meaning in translation – moreover some would make absolutely no sense. Another difficulty was trying to make sense of the sequence of events, as one speaker, would constantly shift from a topic to the next, and it was only after careful re-listening that I was able to make sense of these shifts, but again the sense might have been lost in the written version. Despite these limiting factors, I was able to get stories –not information, but stories – memories and meaning. It is these stories that greatly distinguish this research project from the many articles and books that have been written on the

reconstruction and destruction of the old Beirut Souqs, and the city center in general. As Omar wanted to tell his story, I hope this is part of a process that keeps the stories and histories of the old Beirut Souqs coming out. Perhaps words will win where the legal and social fights have failed.

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