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New Forms of Youth Activism in Contested Cities: The Case of Beirut

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ABSTRACT

Lebanese youth are constructed through fragmented lenses, and are recipients of partial, unresponsive, and often irrelevant policies. Despite these constraints, many youth have become actively engaged in political life, especially since 2005. Three types of youth engagement can be identified: i) the 'conformists', who privilege their sectarian belonging, ii) the 'alternative groups', who engage in professional NGOs, and iii) the new 'activists', who prefer loose organising centred on progressive and radical issues. New forms of youth activism in the contested city of Beirut have been able to exploit interstitial openings for seeds to grow into potentially "disruptive mobilizations". While these resistances may have been limited up to now in time and space, youth activist groups still embarrass, hold accountable and constrain hegemonic politics. They may be generating seeds of collective action that still have to be further structured and organised.

KEYWORDS

Youth; cities; urban activism; Beirut

In a recent issue of the *Middle East Report* entitled "Activism", Jillian Schwedler and Kevan Harris argue that "activism since the [Arab] uprisings… has taken multiple forms" and "is shift[ing] away from large-scale movements and broad demands" to "smaller protests and other forms of resistance [that] are increasing rather than decreasing", despite a "period of authoritarian re-entrenchment".[1] They call on authors to research the multiple and diverse forms of activism, paying special attention to the politics and actions of activists – those *nasheetin* (activists) who privilege "non-institutionalized forms of resistance". These forms of activism are not the "quiet encroachment" type identified by Asef Bayat, as they are not only carried out by the urban poor nor geared towards squatting or accessing services informally.[2] This is an activism characterised by its youthfulness, fluidity and "constantly changing nature", and by creative and innovative means of action involving youth.[3] This activism emerged several years prior to 2011. Indeed, in "the decade before the Arab spring, the locus of activism began to shift from the formal venues of 'old' opposition parties and civil society groups to more amorphous, often transnationally linked social

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[1]Schwedler and Harris, "What is Activism?"
[2]Bayat, "Activism as Social Development".
[3]Khatib and Lust, "Introduction", 3, 5.

movements and organizations"[4] – what Bayat identified as "non-movements".[5] These "created support networks…that eventually formed an activist infrastructure"[6] which has been instrumental in reinventing forms of political mobilisation. It relies on more horizontal ways of engagement, with multiple leaders and loose organisational systems, where social media play an important role in communication and decision-making. Such activism is not necessarily conducive to democratisation,[7] nor is it durable as it is threatened by demobilisation, division and fragmentation.[8] It is, however, enabling youth "to congregate, interact and dream" and pursue "a more civil, inclusive and liberatory form of democracy".[9] Actually, such forms of youth activism are not so specific to the Middle East as they are also a salient characteristic of increasingly consolidating "global urban politics".[10]

In this article, I research new forms of youth activism in a contested city – Beirut, Lebanon – arguing that, against the odds of sectarian politics that largely constrain political action, this activism has been able to exploit "interstitial openings for seeds to grow into potentially disruptive mobilizations". I borrow this notion from Walter Nicholls and Justus Uitermark, who argue that through government interventions on activists, relations in cities are "contradictory and imperfect", generating opportunities for "varied resistances".[11] While this resistance may be limited in time and space, youth activist groups embarrass, hold accountable and constrain hegemonic politics.

Lebanon is a good case study for examining these new forms of activism as it reveals how, despite an oligarchic political system that provides limited means of oppositional politics,[12] young people still find ways to organise collectively. Will one of these attempts bring about an effectively organised action that can threaten the regime? Presently, this seems unlikely. Nevertheless, the documentation and unpacking of these various kinds of activism, and how they may be generating seeds of collective action that yet have to be structured and organised is a question worthy of investigation as it serves both knowledge production and policy advocacy on youth and political change.

Youth groups have a long history of political mobilisation in Lebanon dating back to the early 20th C., with women's movements, religious movements, unions and students' movements. These early mobilisations and claims were mostly along religious, family and class lines, without shaking the sectarian and patriarchal system very much.[13] The 1960s brought in post-colonial ideologies and shifted the allegiance of some towards pan-Arabism, leftist paradigms and rights-based demands.[14] The Lebanese civil war (1974-89) disrupted most of these mobilisations, militarising some and aligning others along sectarian allegiances. A few stood out, such as the Mouvement Social, which is still active in humanitarian work. The post-war period (1990-2005) was characterised by youth joining several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) where their operations became largely

[4]*Ibid.*, 5.
[5]Bayat, *Life as Politics*.
[6]Khatib and Lust, "Introduction", 5.
[7]Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization*.
[8]Khatib and Lust, "Introduction", 15.
[9]Herrera, "Introduction", 5.
[10]Boudreau, *Global Urban Politics*.
[11]Nicholls and Uitermark, *Cities and Social Movements*, 10. This also echoes with the notion of identifying "cracks in the system" to advance change by expanding them, as elaborated by sociologist Elizabeth Shove (mentioned in McGrail, "Cracks in the System", 22.)
[12]Traboulsi, *Social Classes and Political Power*; Salloukh *et al*., *The Politics of Sectarianism*.
[13]Daou, "Feminisms in Lebanon".
[14]Anderson, "The Student Movement in 1968".

dependent on donors' agendas and conditionalities, which professionalised and depoliticised their work as I discuss further below. Again, a few exceptions are noteworthy, such as the Amel Association (established in 1979) which is a non-sectarian NGO that brings together young people from all sectarian groups to work on social services across Lebanon.[15] As of 2005, after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and the withdrawal of the Syrian army, youth activists have engaged in more issue-based politics that transcend sectarian lines and is geared towards building a secular-based citizenship. The 2006 war in Lebanon further accentuated this direction in which youth activism appears to be reclaiming its pre-war legacy, away from sectarianism, militarisation and professionalisation.[16] We see this mostly with feminist and LGBTQ groups who are openly transnational and radical. Secular student groups with progressive agendas also seem to be consolidating in recent years, but exclusively in private universities, while the Lebanese University remains controlled by sectarian politics with no room for independent, secular political action.[17]

This article begins by discussing how Lebanese youth are constructed through fragmented lenses, and are recipients of policies that are partial, unresponsive, and often irrelevant, in which youth are not imagined as agents of political change. The state hypocritically laments their emigration as skilled labour, while it awaits their remittances, and is appeased by not having to address their potential discontent. Donors, universities, the private sector and NGOs are keen on training them to become productive and successful entrepreneurs, while sectarian political patrons want to enrol them as clients. Despite these constraints, I argue that, since 2005, many youth have become actively engaged in political life. Three types of youth engagement can be identified: i) the 'conformists', who privilege their sectarian belonging, ii) the 'alternative groups', who engage in professional NGOs, and iii) the new 'activists', who prefer loose organising centred on progressive and radical issues. The article closes with a brief discussion reflecting on the potential of organised action led by young activists as "a laboratory for future mobilization (…) that could be built on and enlarged to a broader constituency".[18]

The article is informed by twelve years of participant observation as a not-so-young activist advocating more inclusive and sustainable urban spaces and cities. My first action-research project began in 2006 with colleagues and students from the American University of Beirut, and culminated in 2016 with my participation in the Beirut Madinati municipal campaign – a campaign that agitated mainstream sectarian politics in ways that are still reverberating today.[19] Throughout these years, I have mentored and observed young activists mobilising in groups and NGOs, seeking to improve the deteriorating urban conditions of their city. In addition to my subjective positioning as an action-researcher, this article relies on findings gathered from the Power2Youth comparative research project in which I participated as the lead researcher on Lebanon.[20] These include an extensive review of

[15]Amel's vision states that "we should exit of the confessional system, to move towards the civil society and the citizenship in a civic and democratic state." For more information, see http://amel.org/about-us/vision/

[16]I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer who pointed out this dimension. Historicising today's youth activism also helps explain why some people from the older generation have chosen to engage in many of today's young activist groups. Indeed, they seem to recognise in their programs and actions many of the goals and horizons they sought when they used to be politically active.

[17]Gambill, "Student Politics in Lebanon"; Chehayeb, "Fairuz, Hezbollah".

[18]Paciello and Pioppi, *Youth in South East Mediterranean*, 17.

[19]Harb and Fawaz, "Influencing the Politics of Reconstruction"; Harb, "Beyrouth-Madinati".

[20]Power2Youth is subtitled "A Comprehensive Approach to the Understanding of Youth Exclusion and the Prospects for Youth-led Change in the South and East Mediterranean". www.power2youth.eu

the literature on youth in Lebanon as well as analysis of the data collected from qualitative interviews conducted with young NGO members and activists (23 individual and 40 group interviews, held between June and November 2015[21]). Respondents were asked to reflect on their understanding of youth, the aims of their organisation/coalition, their mechanisms and tools of action for mobilisation, their networks, audience, and views on political change in Lebanon.

Lebanese politics and youth policies: depoliticisation, exclusion and sectarian reproduction

The Lebanese state functions essentially as a political system sealed by hegemonic political-sectarian parties operating simultaneously in competition and complementarity with each other.[22] Attempts to break this hegemony (from within or outside the system) result in small gains (such as from the 1998 municipal elections[23]) that do not fundamentally challenge the political sectarian system's elaborate machinery. Perversely, many attempts get co-opted and end up reinforcing the system's domination (such as the labour movement[24]). The election law, which could serve as a substantial channel for political and social change, is another domain where reforms are stopped short. Indeed, the parliamentary elections still obey a political-sectarian logic that facilitates the reproduction of existing power groups, and the consolidation of their sectarian territories. The election law excludes from voting people below 21years of age. It also demands that people vote in the original place of birth of their father's family, even though this is often a remote village or town they left generations ago. Thus, for instance, out of the 1.4 million Lebanese who live in the city of Beirut, a mere 400,000 individuals vote for the city's parliamentarians and municipal councilors. The procedure for changing one's place of registration is not facilitated administratively nor acceptable either socially or politically as people are expected to stay attached to their territorial identities. The ostensible motive is to sustain the demographics upon which the Lebanese sectarian political quota system is based, even though everyone knows these demographics, based on the 1932 census, are now obsolete.

Within this political economy, public officials have two discourses on youth. One that celebrates the Lebanese young people who are successful, and emigrate: they are highly educated and highly skilled young men and women, who are destined for broader horizons, where they carry Lebanon's name high and, if they are really successful, invest their capital in the country.[25] They are not really expected to return, nor to participate in voting for Lebanese representatives while they are abroad. They are used to market the successful image of the Lebanese professional: they are the entrepreneur, doctor, engineer, scientist or scholar... . It can be argued that this high-skilled migration is a "guarantee [of] socio-political stability", in that it "export[s] [the] looming discontent" of youth's potential political competition.[26]

[21]The research team included Nadine Khayat and Maguy Arnous, whom I thank for their input and help.
[22]Harb, *Le Hezbollah à Beyrouth*.
[23]Atallah, "Turning a Research Idea".
[24]Abi-Yaghi and Catusse, "Non à l'Etat-holding".
[25]Today, Lebanon is amongst the top ten countries in the world in terms of remittances, reaching about 20% of its GDP (according to Kasparian, *L'émigration des jeunes libanais*), with a diaspora said to reach seven million people (two times its population).
[26]De Bel-Air, "Factors of Youth Exclusion/Inclusion".

The other public discourse stigmatises youth who are poorly educated and unskilled, representing them as a potentially subversive group that better be policed and controlled. Those young people are frequently the main targets of sectarian political parties, which present them with viable employment and social service opportunities.[27] Alternatives to sectarian politics are often much less rewarding, and incorporate regulatory conditions and institutional setups that keep young people marginalised and vulnerable. Indeed, young people's access to jobs is considerably impacted by corruption and clientelistic practices, commonly referred to as *wasta*.[28] Those youth also seek emigration to improve their living conditions, however their options are not as diverse or gratifying as their better educated and more highly skilled peers. They often end up in dire working conditions in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries or Africa – two major destinations of post-World War II Lebanese emigration,[29] sending remittances to their families. Thus, the socio-economic inequalities that are established at the national scale are reproduced among young people.[30]

The category of youth is also gendered into single young women, who will marry late or not at all – generating social *angst* – and single young men, perceived as a burden on society given their unemployability, and a security threat given the propensity of young people to become radicalised. Accordingly, the public policy understanding of Lebanese youth is dominated by a generic and normative idea of youth exclusion focused on issues of youth unemployment, youth emigration, and a skewed female-male balance.

The academic understanding of Lebanese youth provides a more substantive and critical perception of youth exclusion, and more interestingly, offers some input with regard to their efforts and initiatives to participate socially and politically, despite the numerous hurdles that constrain their inclusion. Scholars have indeed produced a large range of work on youth-related issues, despite the significant fragmentation across academic disciplines and languages.[31]

How do these depoliticising and stigmatising policy discourses materialise? Across the four policy sectors examined in the Power2Youth project (economics, migration, family

[27]Many young men find jobs by resorting to military enrollment in armed forces associated to political parties, militias, and/or private security, as well as employment in the national army and police. They end up having a strong presence in streets and public spaces, which they control, patrol, police, and secure, either officially or unofficially, but most often visibly. No studies document this source of employment for Lebanese youth.

[28]Makhoul and Harrison, "Intercessory Wasta and Village Development".

[29]Tabar, "Country of Emigration and Immigration". While the GCC is a destination for mostly skilled professional labour, Africa attracts less skilled youth and mostly people working in commerce, often in black market trade.

[30]In its 2014 Global Wealth Databook report, Credit Suisse states that 0.3% of the Lebanese population own 50% of its wealth. http://stateofmind13.com/2015/02/18/0-3-of-lebanese-own-50-of-lebanon/

[31]Academic studies on youth can be distinguished according to three methodological approaches, which I differentiate on the basis of discipline. First, scholars of economics, psychology (and sometimes sociology) investigate youth through quantitative tools, yielding a macro-level understanding of youth issues: they measure unemployment, education and migration rates, proposing indicators and costs; they evaluate values and assess related impacts on belonging; and they calculate participation in media. Second, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists study youth using both quantitative and qualitative methods, conducive to meso- and micro- levels of youth analysis: they work on youth-led civil society organisations, young people's agency in participating in public life (online and political), and youth's negotiations of norms and practices. Third, public health researchers adopt a policy-oriented approach to analysis of youth's practices. Mixing quantitative and qualitative methods conducive to policy recommendations, they examine youth's (particularly adolescents') relations to drugs, alcohol and sexuality, as well as to mental health, well-being and happiness, focusing on school and university students rather than 'youth' (See Karam *et al*., "Alcohol Use among University Students", Karam *et al*., "A Rapid Situation Assessment Study", and El Kak, "Sexuality and Sexual Health"). In addition, academic knowledge production on Lebanese youth is mainly produced in the English and French languages. I only identified minor sources in Arabic. Sources in different languages seldom cite each other. Even within the same language, there is compartmentalisation within each discipline, and scholars in one discipline are often unaware of findings in another.

and personal status laws, and spatial planning[32]), a large proportion of youth in Lebanon is actively excluded from the economic, political, social and urban spheres. Public policies are not imagined nor elaborated in ways to include youth actively in policy decisions about issues that concern them and their lives. For public agents, youth are not a priority social group that has to be engaged in the reconstruction and reform processes. They are marginalised in a peripheral ministry, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, where youth issues are reduced to social and cultural concerns, and divorced from politics, under the fake narrative of separating politics and conflict from society.

The failed attempt to develop a national youth policy which ended up being co-opted by the youth wings of political parties, and diluted into a generic policy agenda, illustrates this clearly. The youth policy was the outcome of two initiatives: the Youth Advocacy Process (YAP) and the Youth Forum. The YAP was launched in 2000 in conjunction with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the UN Youth Task Force to initiate a youth policy in Lebanon. It brought together several dozen NGOs working on youth issues, school and university representatives, trade unions and municipalities, as well as the youth wings of (sectarian-based) political parties. The YAP created task forces that organised workshops and produced working papers on five themes: housing and migration, education and culture, social inclusion and political participation, labour and economic participation, and health. The YAP also led to the drafting of a remarkable two-volume study coordinated by UNESCO entitled *National Youth Profile*, which critically documents the situation of young people in Lebanon. In 2009, based on the decision of the Council of Ministers, a Youth Forum was established incorporating a shortlist of 14 youth NGOs as well as 20 youth wings of (sectarian-based) political parties.[33] The Youth Forum's role was "to monitor the youth policy formulation, implementation and evaluation process". The 9-year participatory process that had established a rigorous research-based foundation for issuing a national youth policy was cut short with this decision which clearly gave pre-eminence to the political parties in decision-making over the elaboration of youth policy. As such, the *Youth Policy in Lebanon* document, published in 2010, is a short 36-page text that reads as a generic, bulleted wish list addressing the five policy issues mentioned above in unspecific terms divorced from the critical analysis that one can read in the *National Youth Profile*. As one interlocutor told me: "The contents of the document were intentionally diluted to very general terms in order to maintain consensus among all the political parties."[34] As such, the Youth Advocacy Process ended up – like other initiatives that sought to bridge sectarian politics[35] – depoliticised and co-opted into a Youth Forum and a Youth Policy (endorsed by the government in 2012) that pays lip service to youth needs. It is worth mentioning that the YAP, the Youth Forum and the Youth Policy document are not known to most of the interlocutors I interviewed, which is probably indicative of their desuetude.

While public policy actors and political elites work hard to consolidate their entrenched hegemony over the Lebanese polity, the private sector and international donors are keener on

[32]Harb, "Assessing Youth Exclusion".
[33]See the Youth Forum website: http://www.youthforum-lb.org/en/. It seems to have been last updated in 2015.
[34]Interview with a member of the Youth Forum, June 2015. For instance, while the *National Youth Profile* discusses at length the role of specific legal regulations enabling patriarchy and hetero-normative values and constraining the social integration of youth in Lebanon (particularly women and LGBTQ groups), the *Youth Policy in Lebanon* mentions broadly the need "to amend all laws to guarantee total equality between men and women in rights and duties" without specifying exactly what these laws are.
[35]Clark and Zahar, "Critical Junctures".

involving youth groups in decision-making, but still focus on the same 'problem' categories of unemployment and emigration, with some additional challenges related to education and political participation. The private sector depoliticises youth by categorising them as future successful entrepreneurs and presenting them with the choice of becoming competitive capitalists in the market economy as an inherently good and natural choice.[36] International donors are mobilising youth, mostly via NGOs, into several political, social and rights-based initiatives.[37] However, as Caroline Nagel and Lynn Staeheli argue, those donors are mostly advancing their own geopolitical agendas in the region, and perhaps more seriously, enabling youth's depoliticisation "by shifting political energies away from 'sectarian politics' and towards pragmatic problem-solving at the local scale".[38]

As such, and as I argued elsewhere,[39] Lebanese youth are imagined through fragmented lenses and policies that lack a holistic, interdisciplinary, and integrated understanding of their complex, dynamic and highly differentiated lives. Indeed, public policy largely ignores youth or, at best, minimises their role as active agents of change. Policy discourses and actions are significantly disembedded from the complex dynamics of legal, economic, social, political and spatial planning policy issues, and do not prioritise youth's needs and desires. Most policy actors, as well as experts and scholars, objectify "youth *problems*", without taking into account how they intersect with wider and transversal policy issues related to personal rights, civil laws, gender discrimination, domestic violence, voting rights, citizenship, labour law, access to housing, public transportation, public space, building law, etc. Indeed, no public policy reads youth relationally, linking them to social networks and experiences, which would enable an understanding of how being young is a very diverse and subjective experience, overlapping with several other relationships and inequalities. In sum, public policy discourses and actions regarding youth depoliticise the highly educated and skilled young people, stigmatise and exclude the vulnerable ones, and nudge the others into the sectarian oligarchic system

Three categories of youth organisations

Amidst this bleak public policy environment, young people are trying to improve their lives and build a meaningful future. Three categories of youth can be distinguished, based on the groups they prefer to associate with. The first are the youth who conform to their sectarian identity and hetero-normative social structures, and choose to adhere to sectarian political parties: they are the 'conformists'. The second are the young people who participated in the Independence Intifada of 2005, after the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, and later on chose to mobilise in issue-based or rights-based NGOs, where professionalisation is a main issue.[40] Not necessarily against the sectarian system, they present themselves as viable 'alternatives' to the corrupt elite. The third group are the youth who started organising in

[36]Harb, "Assessing Youth Exclusion."
[37]Nagel and Staeheli, "International Donors, NGOs."
[38]*Ibid.*, 20.
[39]Harb, "Assessing Youth Exclusion."
[40]I use "professionalisation" here in the sense of "NGO-isation" to refer to the fact that NGOs have little potential for fostering significant democratisation given the typically project-focused and short-term nature of their activities (see Jad, "The NGO-isation of Arab Women's Movements"). As such, NGOs end up focusing on fundraising activities to secure their staff salaries and sustain themselves, and thus on project completion. In other words, "paying professionals [becomes] the norm while activists and volunteers start to disappear in a trend that [leads] to less action-oriented and more managerial type of organization" (Mitri, "From Public Space to Office Space", 91).

2006 after the Israeli war on Lebanon in loose campaigns and coalitions, and are more radical in their demands and methods: they are the 'progressive activists'.

Conformist youths

For the main sectarian political groups that make up the Lebanese political system, youth matters are best taken care of within their own structures: their foundations and NGOs.[41] As such, all major sectarian political groups in Lebanon have their own 'youth wings', which are organisations targeting youth, socialising them through sports, leisure and cultural events, and ultimately mobilising them into their partisan structure. There are ten main sectarian-based political parties in Lebanon (Hezbollah, Amal Movement, Future Movement, Democratic Renewal (*Tajaddod*) Movement, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Lebanese Forces, Marada Movement, Phalanges Party (*Kataeb*), Progressive Socialist Party, and Armenian Tachnak), and all have their own institutions that serve youth.[42] In addition, about six youth-relevant organisations, led by Lebanese political elites, serve their own sectarian-based youth constituencies, such as the Moawad, Hariri, Safadi and Makhzoumi Foundations.

Provision of youth services such as sports, scouting and training, depends on the party's financial resources and ability to access public services. Among these parties, a few stand out for their professional and holistic network of service provision. Hezbollah is one of these as it has been mobilising Shii youth effectively for more than thirty years now. It is interesting to take a closer look at Hezbollah for two reasons: on the one hand, its mobilisation strategies provide insight into the reasons why youth are attracted to political Islam;[43] on the other hand, it can be taken as the 'ideal type' through which Lebanese political parties engage youth in their ranks early on, and keep them hostage to their holistic clientelistic system of service provision.[44]

Hezbollah manages two organisations that are specifically dedicated to youth.[45] One is the Mobilization Unit, which incorporates a youth and sports department that manages youth clubs and sports activities, including scouts (*al-Mehdi*), a successful football club (*al-'Ahd*), youth summer camps, field trips and cultural activities for youth. The party owns several sports fields across south Beirut, and many clubs that include more than one hundred teams trained in diverse sports (ping pong, basketball, volleyball, karate, boxing, gymnastics). Several teams are professional, and participate in national sports competitions with games often showcased during religious occasions and commemorations such as Jerusalem Day, Martyrs Day or Adha. Al-Mehdi scouts also operate according to strict recruitment and

[41]On sectarian political parties' service provision, see Cammett, "Partisan Activism and Access to Welfare".

[42]Sectarian political parties have been quite successful in mobilising youth, contrary to secular political parties such as the Lebanese Communist Party or the Syrian Socialist National Party, which are unable to attract young people as evidenced by their very limited impact on political life.

[43]On Sunni youth's mobilisation, including the short-lived excitement around Ahmad al-Assir, see Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon*.

[44]This is especially true for political parties with strong ideology such as the Tachnak and the Lebanese Forces, which best compare to Hezbollah in terms of managing autonomous professional institutions, but with far less financial resources. For the other political parties where political ideology is more fluid, such as the Amal Movement, Future Movement, Aoun's FPM, PSP and the Kataeb, mobilisation strategies are less organised and professionalised, more clientelistic in their structure, and parasitic of public resources. This and the following discussion on Hezbollah's organizations are based on Harb, *Le Hezbollah à Beyrouth*.

[45]*Ibid*.

mobilisation structures and yearly activities associated to Hezbollah schools and educational activities.

The second Hezbollah organisation catering to youth needs is a cultural NGO, the Lebanese Arts Association (LAA), which organises music, theatre and leisure activities for youth, in addition to building museums and parks (*Mleeta, Khiyam, Maroun el-Rass*). In both organisations, girls and boys are segregated and socialised differently – along the classic division lines of more physical activities for the latter and more artistic activities for the former. The purpose of both the Mobilization Unit and the LAA is to engage youth in purposeful and meaningful sports and cultural activities that centre the body and mind on the values of resistance.

In addition to agreeing on the key role they give to sectarian politics, political elites concur that family and kin should also manage youth. Given that family affairs in Lebanon are structurally linked to religious affairs, both family and religious authorities thus have a major role to play in youth socialisation, and hence mobilisation, directly or indirectly, through norms, values and attitudes. Indeed, legal texts governing the private and public lives of youth in Lebanon are hetero-normative, gender-biased and sectarian-based, sanctioning norms and practices that do not abide by this framework.[46] Nizar Saghieh underscores three main consequences of this framework on youth. First, they are strictly framed in relation to their sectarian belonging. Second, the ability of youth, especially women, to organise their everyday lives is largely constrained. Third, young people, especially women, queer, transsexual and homosexual individuals, illegal children, offspring of Lebanese women and foreigners, and all those outside the eighteen recognised sectarian groups, are largely excluded from the society.[47] Several authors have already demonstrated that a "patriarchal connective construction of selves" predominates within Lebanese families.[48]

Nonetheless, Mohammad Faour underscores that changes are taking place with regard to family relations and authority within the family, namely the rise in the percentage of middle and upper class students who identify with their peer group, at the expense of the extended family and religion.[49] This transformation of youth's avenues for knowledge acquisition, which are becoming more horizontal and bidirectional, may explain the choice of another category of youth to shift away from mainstream, conformist modes of engagement with politics.[50]

Youth in alternative NGOs

According to a 2015 report that surveyed a sample of NGOs in Lebanon, the number of registered NGOs in the MoIM (the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities) amounted to 8,311.[51] Of those, only 1,100 were effectively operational.[52] The report also indicated that 41 percent of these NGOs lacked human resources, while 60 percent were short on financial resources, and 74 percent had an operational budget of less than USD 250,000. A second

[46]Saghieh, *Youth Participation*, 192-5.
[47]*Ibid*.
[48]Joseph, "Conceiving Family Relationships", 274; Mikdashi, "Sex and Sectarianism".
[49]Faour, *The Silent Revolution*.
[50]Herrera, "What's New about Youth?"
[51]BRD, *Mapping Civil Society Organizations*, 7-8, 60.
[52]*Ibid*., 23.

inventory of NGOs (the online database Daleel Madani[53]) listed about 420 NGOs in 2015. Those are the ones that voluntarily chose to register their information online. Of these, nearly 25 percent dealt with youth-relevant issues, for a total number of 117, distributed as shown in Table 1. Seventy-eight of them work on youth issues, while many of them work on human and/or personal rights, or in the development and/or advocacy fields (about 35 percent). The rest are scattered between entrepreneurship, religious and student activism and artistic/cultural initiatives. Most of these NGOs are based in Beirut, though a few operate in outlying regions, especially Mount Lebanon, the South and the North. This large number of NGOs is facilitated by legal regulations that make it easy to set up an NGO: as few as four people can decide to establish an NGO and register it with the MoIM, which then issues a number that legalises the NGO's existence.

During the civil war in Lebanon, NGOs' priorities were relief and social services. After the end of the war, in the 1990s, several youth groups became mobilised into interest-based NGOs, keeping their distance from more identity-based NGOs that dominated the war scene. Of note were NGOs advocating environmental protection, disability rights and democratic elections.[54] During this somewhat euphoric post-war phase, young people thought billionaire Prime Minister Rafic Hariri would salvage Lebanon, and bring it back to its imagined heydays. Faith in his persona attracted many young people who returned from abroad to engage in the process of rebuilding and seek a job in the 'Hariri network'. After 1996, however, things began to deteriorate: debt accumulated, Israel waged war on the South of Lebanon, investment promises failed to materialise, Dubai's economic growth eclipsed that of Beirut. Alongside the Syrian Army, which was still ruling Lebanon since the civil war, the 'troika' logic of political allotment among the main sectarian groups (*al-muhassasa*), increasingly penetrated public institutions, which became dysfunctional and progressively replaced by parallel administrations funded by international donors, while service provision became privatised under the pretext of more efficiency. In practice, corruption and clientelism prevailed, enriching sectarian elites at the expense of the people, increasing inequality and injustice.[55] A short glimpse of hope emerged with the municipal elections in 1998, after a long campaign led by civil society groups, including many youths. But Syrian domination over political, economic and social affairs was too strong, and ultimately led Hariri to break ties with Syria. On 14 February 2005, Hariri's murder galvanized Beirut's streets.

Table 1. Youth-Relevant NGOs in Lebanon (May 2015)

1. Organisations related to government and political parties	**20**	**17%**
2. NGOs	**78**	**67%**
2a. Student/labour unions	6	5%
2b. Business/finance/entrepreneurship	14	12%
2c. Rights-based	20	17%
2d. Development/advocacy	22	19%
2e. Religious	11	9%
2f. Other (art/cultural)	5	4%
3. Coalitions/campaigns/non-conventional NGOs	**19**	**16%**
Total	**117**	100%

[53]Daleel Madani is an information and research centre for and about civil society in Lebanon, which includes an online searchable directory of NGOs in Lebanon .http://daleel-madani.org/directory.

[54]On environmental NGOs, see Karam, *Le Mouvement Civil au Liban*; on disability rights, Kingston, *Reproducing Sectarianism*; on elections, see Atallah, "Turning a Research Idea".

[55]Leenders, *Spoils of Truce*.

The Independence Intifada brought thousands of people to Martyrs Square in downtown Beirut who camped there for long nights requesting justice and the withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon. They chanted for national unity, independence and a free Lebanon. Some time later, the Syrian Army announced its withdrawal, and the anti-Hariri coalition, centred around the Shii parties of Hezbollah and Amal, but including Sunni, Christian and Druze groups as well, organised a farewell party that gathered thousands of people in Riad el-Solh Square just meters away from the Hariri 'camp', to thank Syria for its services, on 8 March 2005. This group became known as the March 8 coalition. Days later, on 14 March, the Hariri camp celebrated the departure of the Syrian Army, bringing its own thousands into the streets. The Hariri-coalition included other Christian and Druze groups and a minority of Shii individuals. Thus, the slogan of Independence did not hold very long, and was quickly overtaken by sectarian political parties, which organised themselves into the March 14 coalition.[56] The polarisation of Lebanese society into March 8 and March 14 has continued since, although political alliances and oppositions have reconfigured memberships in odd ways that are beyond the scope of this article.[57]

As such, the 2011 Arab uprisings were not a particularly salient milestone for the Lebanese, or for youth. Critical junctures in Lebanon were the 2005 Independence Intifada discussed above, as well as the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon which caused 1,200 deaths among Lebanese in addition to major infrastructural destruction, and the 2008 May events when, for the first time, sectarian conflict opposed Shii and Sunni, which further galvanized polarisation between the March 8 and March 14 camps.[58] These events accelerated the emigration of highly educated and skilled youth, and further complicated the prospects of reform and reconstruction at the national scale. In addition, they reinforced the role of international donors and the private sector in defining policy agendas. Yet, amidst these episodes of wars, conflict and refugee influx, young people became mobilised in the dozens of NGOs created in the aftermath of the 2005 Independence Intifada – mostly NGOs centred on promoting citizenship, capacity-building, inter-sectarian dialogue, social cohesion, conflict resolution and human rights.

In the context of the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, NGOs focused on humanitarian and social services, education, health, rebuilding and environmental issues. "After the withdrawal of the Syrians, political prospects appeared possible", said many of our interlocutors.[59] Indeed, between 2005 and 2009, youth became galvanized and dreamt of change, establishing or joining NGOs. Among them was the Youth Economic Forum (YEF), established in 2007 with the idea of engaging youth to inform public policymaking. YEF worked on mobilising hundreds of youth throughout Lebanese regions, training them on elaborating policy briefs on key policy issues. The briefs were published and disseminated with the aim of building up young people's political consciousness in preparation for the 2009 national elections.[60] Many other initiatives developed in parallel, centred on ideas of citizenship, conflict resolution, social cohesion, etc.[61] Termed "alternative NGOs" by

[56]Clark and Zahar, "Critical Junctures".
[57]For more on the post-2005 period in Lebanon and power reconfigurations, see Picard, "Lebanon in search of sovereignty."
[58]*Ibid.*
[59]Interviews, June 2015.
[60]*Ibid.*
[61]Interviews, October 2015.

Janine Clark and Marie-Joelle Zahar, these two dozen new youth organisations – mostly concentrated in Beirut – relied mainly on volunteers.[62] In them, youth were experimenting with novel mechanisms of communication and new strategies of mobilisation. Most of our interlocutors indicated their reliance on social media as a main tool of networking and dissemination, in addition to participation in workshops, fairs, conferences and training programs, locally and abroad. But they also complained of fundraising difficulties, and the challenges of attracting and retaining volunteers, describing how their work became more reactive than proactive.[63] Several of these NGOs were thus short-lived, and disappeared from the scene rapidly.

Paradoxically, the international funding that poured into Lebanon after 2005, 2006 and 2008 was channelled mainly into March 14 NGOs, and the political elites' foundations.[64] As such, aid strategies promoted and accommodated the existing sectarian system rather than seeking to transform it structurally, thereby demobilising the associational sector, which became instead a springboard to public office or professional networks.

Even among the alternative NGOs, and as the literature has clearly established, NGOs often became key partners in a competitive industry in which donors and political elites dictated associative agendas.[65] Many NGOs depoliticise and demobilise prospects of political and social change, especially among youth groups.[66] In the Lebanese case, Caroline Nagel and Lynn Staeheli, as well as Joanne Nucho show how numerous NGOs, even those with the best of intentions, lose their goals of empowering the communities they are working in because they are keen on abiding by donors' agendas and conditionalities, and are not able to challenge mainstream politics.[67] Other authors have shown how NGOs frequently become co-opted by sectarian politics and entrenched private interests.[68] Bassel Salloukh *et al*. further detail the strategies of the sectarian political elite in reproducing sectarianism in NGOs. They argue that NGOs are:

> strategic partners of both the sectarian/political elite and international organizations determined to involve the third sector in a governance model based on neoliberal structural adjustment and state retrenchment. Dependence on foreign aid consequently has skewed civil society's discourse in favour of reform and accommodation within the existing sectarian system (…). [S]ectarian elite strategies (...) manipulate, co-opt, and neutralize Lebanon's civil society sector.[69]

Against these constraints, some NGOs hoped that the national elections of May 2009 would present an opportunity for change, especially as there was serious talk of redesigning the election law according to proportional representation to make it possible for new political elites to get elected democratically.[70] Their hopes were quickly crushed. On 7 May 2008, after a year and a half-long political crisis, the March 14-led government decided to remove Airport security chief who had close ties to Hezbollah and shut down Hezbollah's internal telecommunications system. Hezbollah interpreted these decisions as a declaration of

[62]Clark and Zahar, "Critical Junctures", 7.
[63]Interviews, June 2015.
[64]Clark and Zahar, "Critical Junctures", 7.
[65]Sukarieh and Tannock, *Youth Rising?*; Moghnieh, "Global Expertise".
[66]Kothari, "Introduction".
[67]Nagel and Staeheli, "International Donors, NGOs"; Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism*.
[68]Karam, *Le Mouvement Civil au Liban*; Kingston, *Reproducing Sectarianism*; Clark and Salloukh, "Elite Strategies".
[69]Salloukh *et al*., *The Politics of Sectarianism*, 53, 58-9.
[70]National elections in Lebanon are designed in such a way as to allow the most powerful political parties to win the most votes, namely the ones led by sectarian elites and their constituencies. Scholars often note election law as the cornerstone of any significant political change in Lebanon. See Salloukh, "The Limits of Electoral Engineering".

war, given that its military resistance against Israel relies on these communication and security systems. Hezbollah gave the government an ultimatum to revoke the decisions but this did not happen. On 8 and 9 May, Hezbollah-led fighters took down by force several neighbourhoods in Beirut where the headquarters and services of Hariri's political party, the Future Movement, were located, leading to 11 deaths. The conflict ended with the Lebanese Army brokering a deal with the government to revoke its decisions. A few weeks later, in May 2008, a Doha-brokered agreement secured the March 8 groups' political power.[71] The national elections eventually took place a year later, according to a law drafted basically to renew the mandates of the existing March 8 and March 14 political leaders, without proportional representation, and foreclosing any opportunities to change the political establishment. Several people perceived the 2009 elections as the end of a significant mobilisation effort to change politics in Lebanon. One NGO activist stated:

> In 2009, *khalas* [it's over], I gave up. I said to myself, never again will I believe in the possibility of change in this country. I really believed in the elections. I prepared myself to run. In my NGO, we worked years for this. You think my ambition is to be in an NGO? Not at all. The NGO, from the very start, was my way to establish a party, and to run for elections, so I can change things. Now… I don't know. Maybe with this new generation, they are trying new things, maybe it will work with them. I don't know.[72]

Youth as progressive activists

After the 2009 elections, a wave of despair and helplessness overtook youth mobilisation. The 2011 Arab uprisings timidly reverberated in Lebanon through the holding of short-lived and poorly organised street protests asking for the downfall of the sectarian regime. During this phase, new forms of collective action consolidated. Some earlier experiments undertaken in the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli war had engaged youth loosely in coalitions, helping displaced Lebanese (*Samidoun*) and assisting reconstruction efforts (AUB Reconstruction Task Force).[73] In 2012, a group of activists, including leading feminists, launched the Take Back Parliament campaign. They sought to identify and mobilise one hundred people to take part in an electoral list supporting a political programme advocating an independent secular state, socio-economic justice and democracy. Some activists and NGO members joined them with an eye to the next national elections due in 2013. However, the Take Back Parliament campaign died a year later due to the inability to get people to agree on a collective programme, as well as the scepticism that surrounded the campaign and the lack of belief in the possibility of putting an end to sectarian politics in Lebanon through elections.[74] Critics highlight that the Take Back Parliament movement did not manage to transcend class boundaries and reach out to the youth mobilised within sectarian political parties, remaining an educated middle-class youth phenomenon.[75] However, several participants in the campaign noted that Take Back Parliament was a useful learning experience, and an important phase in forging a political consciousness that could be further consolidated.

[71]For more on the so-called 2008 conflict in Lebanon, and the ensuing changing rules of the political game in Lebanon, refer to the ICG report *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*.

[72]Interview, June 2015.

[73]On the work of *Samidoun*, see Moghnieh, "Global Expertise"; on the role of the AUB Reconstruction Task Force, see Al-Harithy, *Lessons in Post-War Reconstruction*.

[74]Maaroufi, "Can Lebanon's Secular Youth?"

[75]*Ibid.*

They thought the experience broke the March 8/14 monopoly and revealed the existence of a small, elitist but engaged group of young secular independent activists eager to participate in politics. Some of them thus continued their work in secular student organisations within universities, and managed to increase their impact there.[76]

Since then, the war in Syria has had a dire impact on the country, with the influx of refugees that began pouring in by the hundreds, then the thousands, reaching more than 1 million to date. The refugee crisis pushed youth and NGOs to mobilise to provide relief and support. It also brought in more donor funding to NGOs that redefined their agendas to position themselves as legitimate partners. However, the refugee crisis is also a great source of tension for the Lebanese, and was well exploited by political leaders to postpone the 2013 national elections, because of "insecurity". This postponement generated anger and isolated protests in the streets, which were rapidly and violently repressed. In May 2014, the presidential elections were also cancelled, furthering a political limbo managed by an illegitimate parliament, a dysfunctional government and no leadership. Resentment against the unaccountable, corrupt political elite that only services its own narrow interests, and the increasingly inefficient provision of basic services grew deeper.[77] It erupted in an unprecedented wave of discontent and protests that swamped Beirut's Martyr's Square in August 2015, in reaction to a scandalous garbage crisis that is still unresolved due to internal political bickering among political elites.

Led by a group calling itself "#YouStink" (*Tel3it Rihetkun*), dozens of small coalitions, NGOs and independent activists took to the streets, leading up to a sizable demonstration on 29 August 2015, requesting an ecological waste management plan, the resignation of the Minister of Environment, and a new election law. Other demands included reliable basic services, free access to public spaces and the coastline. In addition, the activists invented a remarkable slogan for the first time post-2006, requesting accountability from all political leaders across both March 8 and March 14 camps for failed public services and corruption: "all of them means all of them" (*kellun yaani kellun*). This was unprecedented as, after the conflict of May 2008, no one dared criticize Hezbollah and its Shii ally, the Amal movement. Protestors held pictures of all political leaders in Martyrs Square, chanting "*kellun yaani kellun*". What became known as *al-Hirak* ("the movement") included a range of NGO experts and many activists with experience in a variety of fields: human rights, ecology, urban issues, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, etc. It also incorporated new collectives, of which the most visible were *Bedna Nhasib* ("We Want Accountability"), and *Al-Shaab Yurid* ("The People Want"). Al-Hirak "[renewed] recurrent topics of contestation and [reinvigorated] older forms of activism".[78]

As it grew stronger, the movement began facing violent repression from state police, and progressively ceased its protest actions. It was also weakened by inner divisions. A range of accusations against the leaders regarding their independence and sources of funding weakened people's trust. Al-Hirak was thus rapidly silenced through rumours and police repression that harassed, threatened and terrorised protestors, beating and jailing them,

[76] *Ibid.*

[77] Electricity shortages across Lebanon are notorious. A severe drought in 2014 also took a further toll on people, who now had to purchase water from dubious uncontrolled sources. Traffic in Lebanon has reached very high levels of congestion that significantly constrain people's mobility.

[78] Abiyaghi *et al.*, "From *isqat an-nizam at-ta'ifi* ", 78.

irrespective of gender and age, and justifying this violence by accusing youth of disrupting the social and moral orders, and threatening security.

Nevertheless, Al-Hirak gave more visibility and voice to the rather loosely organised collectives and campaigns that had already been operating, each in their own 'niche'. Many of these groups had been experimenting for a few years with a range of tools and modes of action, and were learning from each other, especially when their activism led to successful results. Among those, three were particularly successfully in their demands targeting a more liveable city. I present them briefly before discussing their distinctive features.[79] First, the *Nahnoo* NGO lobbied the municipality for many years, ultimately reaching an agreement to re-open the city's largest public park (*Horch Beirut*) that was closed for decades for unconvincing reasons. Today, the park is enjoyed by Beirutis, and is managed by volunteers trained by Nahnoo. Second, the campaign to protect *Dalieh*, a beautiful rocky coastal area in Beirut, has managed to delay and perhaps prevent the construction of a private resort in this place used by hundreds of people every weekend. They succeeded in doing this with a series of protests, media campaigns, a legal enquiry that demonstrated how the site had served historically as a commons and was privatised under shady circumstances, and an international design competition that provided alternative ways of protecting the site. Third, the Stop the Highway campaign succeeded in preventing a highway from being built through a neighbourhood rich in urban heritage. To do this, they surveyed and mapped the area to highlight its ecological and urban value, as well as its rich socio-spatial activities. They also conducted archival research that showed the site had been expropriated and could be used instead as a neighbourhood park. Finally, they consulted a transportation engineer whose carried out a traffic study that showed clearly that the planned highway would not diminish traffic in the area, as was claimed. Armed with this rich dossier, they lobbied the municipality to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment study on the project, which confirmed its negative impacts, and ultimately did not give the mayor much choice but to halt the project.

Five features distinguished these new activist groups from the more typical, professional NGOs. First, their non-structured, open-ended, flexible setup enabled them to discuss their issues openly. They perceived the institutionalisation of their work within an NGO as too rigid and confining. Their work, they said, benefitted from being freely organised, which provided a comfortable space to debate and experiment creatively.[80] They brainstormed, researched, discussed, consulted, met, thought, and generated ideas. Second, new activist groups did not have a specific leader and did not want one; they rejected hierarchical structures and preferred horizontal forms of shared leadership, where decision-making was done collectively and often impulsively. Many of the leading activists in these discussions and processes were young women, as well as members of LGBTQ groups. Third, their work was grounded in research and action-research:[81] they spent time understanding the issue in-depth, conducting fieldwork, consulting with experts, reading up on relevant laws, and going to archives. Fourth, the new activists relied extensively on social media as their means of communication: Whattsapp as a main platform for communicating, sharing ideas,

[79]The following two paragraphs are based on interviews held in November 2015, as well as participant observation with these groups, informal conversations with their activists, and a desk review of their social media campaigns, their websites and reports which I have been conducting since 2013. For more, see Harb, "Cities and Political Change."

[80]Interview, November 2015.

[81]On the role of action-research in social change, see Pettit, "Learning to Do Action Research".

debating, arguing and organising, and mainly Facebook, less so Twitter, for making their voice heard and disseminating their claims. They also built websites to feature their concerns and actions, and used crowdfunding techniques to fundraise. Fifth, they used a whole range of strategies and tools: lobbying, negotiation, media and social media, protests, litigation, as well as performances, exhibitions, conferences, installations and design competitions.

Galvanized by al-Hirak, several networks of activists (those working on human rights, democracy, policy reform, the environment, and urban and LGBTQ issues), came together and decided to organise a campaign for the 2016 municipal elections in Beirut: they named themselves *Beirut Madinati* ("Beirut, My City"). In only a few months, the group had about one hundred members. Beirut Madinati's activists wrote bylaws, a code of ethics, a municipal programme, a media and communication strategy, a fundraising strategy, recruited hundreds of volunteers, and drafted a vetting strategy document that oriented its selection of municipal candidates.[82] For the first time in the history of elections in Lebanon, the list included 50 percent men and 50 percent women, none of whom came from the political establishment. It opposed the 'Beiruti's list' sponsored by Saad Hariri, the son of Rafic, and led by Jamal Itani, the CEO of Solidere, the real estate company that epitomised the neoliberal reconstruction of Beirut, and brought together all representatives of sectarian political parties who, typically, forgot they were yesterday's enemies. On election day in May 2016, Beirut Madinati rallied more than 1,000 volunteers, encouraging people to vote for a list of independent candidates eager to improve the liveability of the city. Beirut Madinati's list did not win, but gathered 32 percent of the votes, while the Beiruti's list got 43 percent. It was an outcome that greatly exceeded the campaign's expectations. Had the electoral system been proportional, ten of Beirut Madinati's candidates would be serving on the capital's municipal council today. As one observer told me, Beirut Madinati lost the election, but was victorious.[83]

Beirut Madinati epitomizes the new type of activism in post-Hirak Lebanon. This is an activism that is not merely interested in challenging the sectarian political system by bringing a novel set of alternative political actors to power. It seeks to dismantle sectarian politics to build a secular state, promoting values of social justice, equity, inclusion and people-centred politics. As such, this is a progressive type of activism that is quite different from the action of alternative NGOs, as it seeks to identify the "interstitial openings for seeds to grow" (or the 'cracks in the system') in the hope of multiplying them so that they ultimately coalesce into a social movement which can overthrow the ruling order. It is also an activism made possible by the high density and diversity of activist organisations that consolidated over the past decade in the city of Beirut. As Walter Nicholls and Justus Uitermark argue with respect to immigrant rights activists in Amsterdam, Paris and Los Angeles, this density and diversity provides activists with "relational opportunities" that enable access to resources, and with "emotion-generating interactions" that fuel and shape struggles, and may sustain mobilisation.[84]

[82]See their website, www.beirutmadinati.com, to check these documents, as well as their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. The Beirut Madinati crowdfunding campaign gathered close to $200,000 in less than three weeks. I am one of the early members of Beirut Madinati. This and the next paragraph are based on my insider's experience of the movement.

[83]Informal conversation, May 2015. Of course, Beirut Madinati is not to be romanticised and incorporates many challenges. For a critical review of its municipal campaign, see Cambanis, *People Power and its Limits*.

[84]Nicholls and Uitermark, *Cities and Social Movements*, 11, 16.

Concluding thoughts: youth activism in contested cities

In this article, I have shown how Lebanese politics and policies addressing youth frame them using fragmented narratives that depoliticise the highly educated and skilled ones, while stigmatising and excluding the vulnerable ones, and inciting others to join the sectarian oligarchic system. Young people's agency leads them to either conform to mainstream sectarian politics, hetero-normative social structures and pious norms, integrate into alternative NGO groups, or politically engage in progressive activist platforms.

I argued that the latter are endowed with more potential for political change than NGOs which are frequently too professionalised, and prone to manipulation, co-optation and neutralisation by sectarian politics, if not depoliticisation by donors' agendas. It is a tenuous potential but a worthy one to observe and track. Surely, activist networks need to navigate major challenges. They have to face a hegemonic sectarian political system that is keen on protecting its assets, an ineffective political representation system, and a fraught geopolitical context in which wars, conflicts and refugee crises keep unfolding. However, amidst this incredibly structurally constrained environment, the perseverance and successes of a small, isolated set of initiatives cannot be dismissed as irrelevant or short-lived. Activist networks in Lebanon, especially the young people engaged in them, are empowered, inspired and organising in ways that may enable them to inhabit the interstitial openings in the oligarchic political system and expand them into sustained mobilisations. They are not forming a collective organised group yet – and may not do so anytime soon – as the difficulties of sustaining volunteerism and overcoming internal dissent and individual competition are still being navigated. Moreover, the fact that they are urban, educated, middle-class people exclusively focused on issues in the capital city make them prey to a good deal of critique and doubt.

The legislative elections of May 2018, designed according to a new proportional law – a "bastardized" one surely,[85] but one that could engender the coalescence of disparate contentious platforms – may, like Beirut Madinati in 2016, plant the seeds of disruptive mobilisation. The journey remains quite arduous however and requires relentless efforts that can be interrupted at any time by an entrenched political and economic order that will not easily forego its dominance. Indeed, activism and protests are not enough to bring about democratisation, which requires organisation and strategy that youth-based protest movements negotiate with difficulty.[86] As Paciello and Pioppi note in their discussion of these new activisms, "[their] horizontality and atomized character is also clearly undermining their chance to engage in long-term battles, to build larger alliances and to form a solid political alternative to the regimes".[87]

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[85]To read more about the current electoral law, see Atallah "Our New Electoral Law".
[86]Diamond, "Postscript. From Activism to Democracy", 324-6.
[87]Paciello and Pioppi, "Youth in the South East Mediterranean", 17.

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