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MANUFACTURED PRECARITY: HOW A BIASED LEGAL SYSTEM, ECONOMIC CRISIS, AND ENTRENCHED POWER STRUCTURES PRODUCE HOUSING INSECURITY IN BEIRUT

by
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ABSTRACT
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Title: Manufactured Precarity: How a Biased Legal System, Economic Crisis, and Entrenched Power Structures Produce Housing Insecurity in Beirut

Lebanon's capital city of Beirut has for more than 30 years been subject to speculative investments in land, where housing's value has been severely tipped to acting as an asset, rather than a stable unit of dwelling for the city's inhabitants. As such, the available stock of affordable housing units for the city's most poor and vulnerable classes has continuously shrunk. The remainder of this housing is further contested because of the influx of more than a million Syrian refugees fleeing the country's civil war since 2011 – Syrian refugees/migrants composed anywhere from 15-20% of the population of Lebanon in 2022. Still other migrants came to the country to do contract work and seek affordable housing units in the city they work in.

This tight housing market was squeezed even further by the economic and political crisis that began in Lebanon in 2019 and has devalued the local currency by more than 95% as of the end of 2022, and the explosion of ammonium nitrate in the Port of Beirut in August of 2020 – which damaged more than 70,000 housing units.

Analyzing five residential multi-story apartment buildings in the Geitawi neighborhood of Beirut that house vulnerable populations, this thesis proposes that the conditions that the tenants live in, which are generally poor and defined by uncertainty about their ability to remain in place (precarity), have been manufactured. Several factors have manufactured these precarious conditions: first, the city's housing market and its legal framework, which have empowered landlords to solely dictate their tenants' conditions; second, the lack of protections or recourse available for tenants, which the economic crisis has exacerbated to the point where tenants have little options to challenge their precarity and the landlord who are a primary cause of it.

The extreme asymmetry in power that has developed between landlord and tenant in these five buildings confirms previous scholarly work on precarity: that modern cities produce precarity by design. It also suggests that power hierarchies of property that produce precarity can become even more entrenched in the absence of a framework of state-sanctioned rights. This thesis also adds to recent scholarship analyzing the power relationships that form between landlords and tenants that have also found that asymmetries lead to poor outcomes for tenants and are difficult to address through market-based regulations and widespread legal frameworks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

ABBREVIATIONS

LL: Lebanese Lira

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USD: United States Dollar

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Negotiating without a government in a crisis

1. Problem Statement

Lebanon does not honor the right to housing for its population. The country has historically failed to introduce a coherent housing policy framework that supports lower-and-middle income families (Sadik, 1996). Worse, during the period following Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990), the state has increasingly promoted the use of land as leverage to attract foreign and domestic capital, which has transformed the built environment of cities like Beirut into investment assets at the expense of housing (Fawaz & Mneimneh, 2020; Beirut Urban Lab). The trend of foreign investments in Beirut's built environment dates back to the 1950's (Traboulsi, 2012), but since the end of the civil war public policymaking has deliberately shifted to incentivize it. Thus, several laws were introduced to facilitate land and property transactions in Beirut and channel capital into the built environment. As a result, expensive high-rises, which are largely out-of-reach for most of the population, have expanded in the city's landscape, transforming deeply the city's social and spatial landscapes (Ashkar, 2015). Because of this, the housing market in Beirut is pressured by large conglomerates and investors buying and holding land and properties, with no financial or legal incentives to rent at affordable or market rates.

In many neighborhoods, apartment buildings built before the civil war are the only feasible housing option for Beirut's lower classes. The conditions of these buildings vary

depending on the owner, but lax enforcement of building laws requiring owners to maintain the buildings, mean many are dilapidated. The growing impact of investors on the built environment has occurred at the expense of lower-and-middle income groups' access to housing. Without access to these new developments, the growing population of low-income individuals and families from a range of groups – refugees, migrant workers, and Lebanese – are forced to maneuver and seek housing in more insecure buildings and compete in affordable neighborhoods (Ashkar, 2015).

In Lebanon, migrant workers and refugees have almost no rights under the governing system, and their presence and labor are easily and frequently criminalized (Saghieh et al., 2020). Migrant workers who arrived under the country's contract-work system[1] (Kafala) are considered to be illegally residing in the country if they leave their employers.[2] Even those migrant workers still employed with contracts are not subject to the protections of the Lebanese Labor Laws, which dictate hours and conditions of work. Syrian workers who arrived as refugees also have little protections under the Lebanese Labor Laws and often work in dangerous conditions for below minimum wage. It's important to note that some Syrian workers arrived in the country under the contract work system and not as "refugees" per-se, so the line between these identities can by nuanced and blurred.

[1] The "Kafala system" is an informal way of referring to Lebanon's sponsorship and contract work system for migrant workers to the country. It also refers to the practices and outcomes of the sponsorship system, which restricts the rights of migrants and leaves room for abuses by the employers. For more see Pande, 2013.

[2] One of the requirements of the Kafala system is that the migrant worker always have a sponsor, or employer, while living in the country. If the worker leaves their employer without finding a new one, and their employer reports this fact, the worker is no longer legally able to live in the country.

Both migrant workers and the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Syria since the start of its civil war in 2011, have largely integrated themselves into Beirut's economy as necessary labor (Fawaz et al., 2014), and both populations face imprisonment and harassment from the state because of their criminalized status. For example, Lebanese law prohibits Syrian refugees who arrived after 2015 from registering with the UNHCR as protected refugees, and many among those who arrived before 2015 lost their status as refugee when they became workers (Fawaz et al., 2018). This has left hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in a precarious position as migrant workers who can't return to their country and don't have protections as refugees.

Most of Lebanon's refugees – more than 70 percent according to the UNHCR in 2014 — access shelter through the rental market (Fawaz et al., 2014). Very few of the more than 1 million refugees in Lebanon are sheltered in camps. Similarly migrant workers who are not sheltered in their employers' homes, find shelter through Lebanon's housing market. This market is not directly regulated by state law, but laws other laws (such as those criminalizing refugees and migrant workers) affect it. These laws and lack of regulation strongly influences the present inequalities between the land-owning class and tenants, and simultaneously free landowners from performing duties to their tenants like securing minimum living standards.

Lebanon's economic crisis has magnified the existing inequalities and problems wrought by the country's nonexistent housing policy, capital consolidation and redevelopment, and prejudices against refugees and migrant workers (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Many of Lebanon's poor populations inhabit an intersection between extreme financial insecurity and discrimination, whose condition has been dramatically

exacerbated by the ongoing extreme inflation devaluing the local currency and making their wages almost worthless. These compounding factors have coalesced to produce populations living in uncertainty about their ability to access basic services and meet their needs. This uncertainty, combined with tenuous access to resources and alliances, and the lack of rights and protections from the state (Campbell and Leheij, 2021), leaves these populations in a generally precarious situation.

Refugees and migrant workers are forced to live in buildings in Beirut with landlords that will rent to them. They are therefore forced into worse spatial conditions, while they are also unable to resist eviction, given they have no rights, should the landlord decide to evict them (Dahdah, 2016.) Landlords who will rent to migrant workers and refugees often own dilapidated buildings — unsafe, with failing infrastructure and high population densities. These landlords typically prefer to rent to migrant workers and refugees than to other tenants because the criminalized or tenuous status in the country makes them less likely to resist eviction. So, the insecure populations are forced to accept living in harsh conditions and overcrowded living conditions (Dahdah, 2016), with little or no security from eviction.

B. Research Question, framework, and argument

1. Research Question:

The thesis explores housing precarity for vulnerable low-income individuals, including Syrian refugees and migrant workers, living in today's Beirut. It asks:

- How do low-income home seekers negotiate their access to shelter in today's Beirut?

- How do specific factors linked to their personal precarity (e.g., legal, national, class) affect their position in negotiating the conditions in which they can dwell in the city and the outcomes of these negotiations?

2. Framework:

The thesis explores these questions by investigating cases within a specific housing typology: large-scale deteriorated residential buildings rented out in substandard conditions through informal rental agreement. Increasingly seen in Beirut, this typology of building offers a unique context to explore my questions because it brings together several population groups living in relatively similar physical conditions, and thus allows me to explore the differences imposed by the status of these individuals.

3. Argument:

The thesis finds that both refugees and migrant workers dwell in high levels of uncertainty, pay exploitative rent, and deal with poor living conditions, even when they occupy middle-income residential apartment buildings in the studied neighborhood of Beirut. The thesis further finds that the interviewed households had very little room for negotiating better conditions, primarily due to (a) the highly unregulated and tight market conditions, and (b) the criminalization of their status as workers and residents. Thus, landlords (or their representatives) consistently decide on the outcome of the negotiations, even if they are more lenient or favorable for tenants.

4. Significance

As markets become even more entrenched as a "regulatory" mechanism of housing, Lebanon's case and these experiences of tenants negotiating with landlords in a context almost totally devoid of pro-tenant public intervention add to emerging literature dissecting the exercise of power between landlords on tenants.

Additionally, these stories highlight and can enrich scholarly understanding of how precarity affects city-dwellers in cities in the Global South (or North) without strong government regulation of housing. This is important to balance a literature, which, in recent years, has celebrated a lack of state oversight – or informality – as an emancipatory framework that could secure better rights and housing conditions for low-income city dwellers otherwise excluded from urban economies (Holston, 2009), or saw in it an entrepreneurial energy to be harnessed (De Soto, 2000). For future policymaking, this kind of scholarship, hopes to prove the value of addressing urban precarity by addressing structural inequalities that emerge from exploitative systems of property access and rights, particularly in how they affect low-income tenants.

C. Methodology

To investigate some of the ways in which housing precarity is manufactured and experienced in Beirut, I have selected and studied buildings of a specific typology that are increasingly seen in Beirut to house vulnerable populations: multi-story residential

buildings that were built before 1975. I specifically focused on this building typology because (a) it is predominant, and (b) by working with the same typology, and in the same neighborhood, I sought to eliminate other factors that may have undermined my comparative analysis.

This thesis approached investigation by selecting five buildings with the same typology (occupants with mixed statuses, deteriorating conditions, built before the Lebanese Civil War) to compare the situations of the various populations and how residents negotiate their place. The research draws from property titles, which contain the ownership history of the buildings**,** as well as from in-depth interviews with the tenants and landlords to analyze the factors that produce varied levels of housing insecurity.

Geitawi was chosen as the focal point of research because it is a historic neighborhood with a mixed population of refugees, migrant workers, foreign expatriates, and Lebanese families. Most of the buildings were constructed more than 40 years ago and have deteriorated since then. In choosing Geitawi, an important factor was my own residency in the neighborhood for more than a year-and-a-half at the time of this writing, I have seen and experienced landlords refusing to accept rent in Lebanese Lira, opting to rent to well-off westerners, and pricing precarious families and individuals out of the neighborhood.

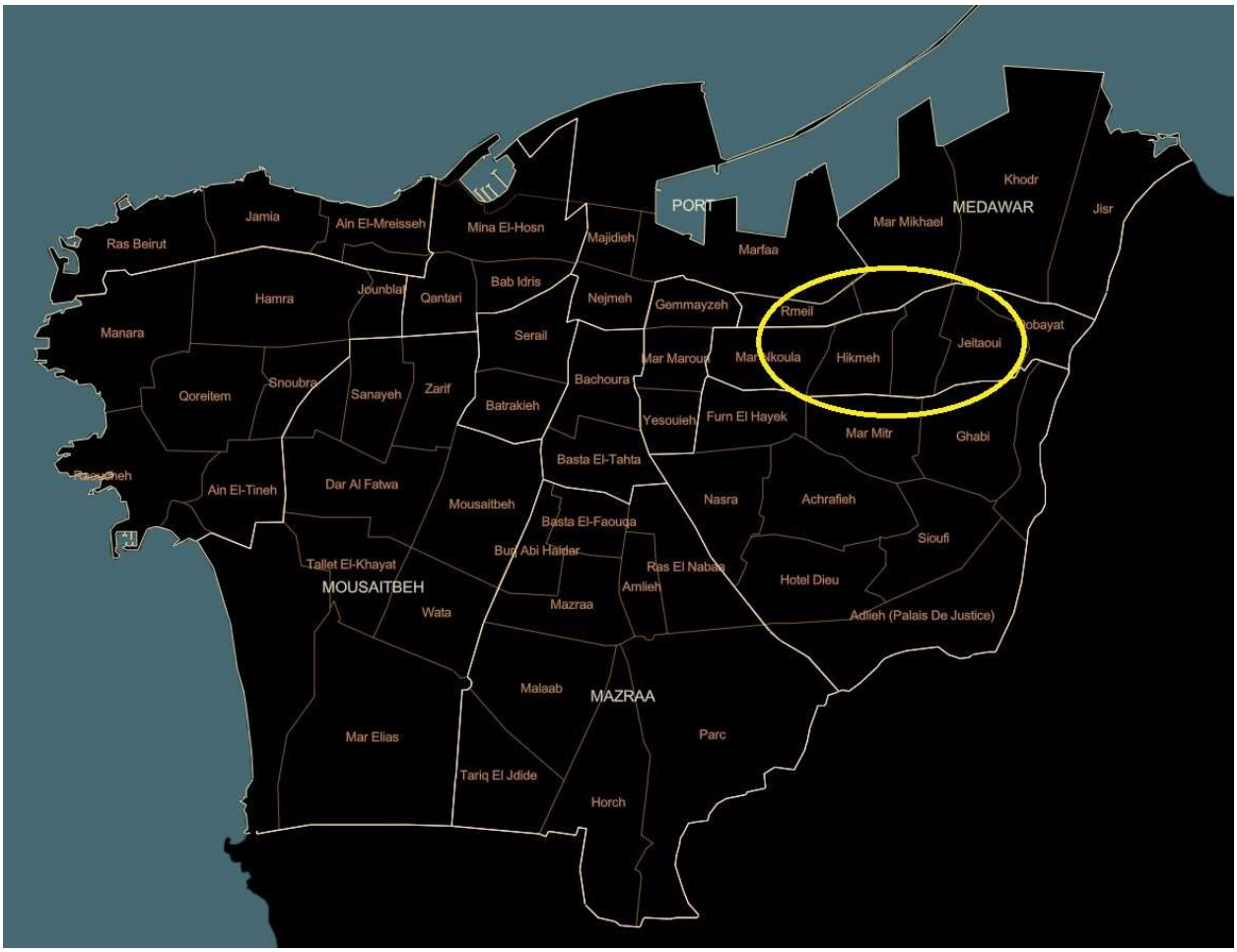

Figure 1: Map of Beirut with the area of study— Geitawi, or Jeitaoui – circled (Beirut Urban Lab)

Figure 2: Area of study

1. Selected and mapped in-depth five buildings

My research began by speaking with NGOs that work with refugees and migrant workers in Geitawi – the Housing Monitor and the Anti-Racism Movement. They connected me with a few willing participants helped me to select the buildings I studied. The Housing Monitor also provided me with data on their efforts to help tenants facing evictions through legal channels. After this I had some trouble in conducting field work. I

went on many walks through the neighborhood to locate buildings that fit the physical typology I had selected to research.

When I would find possible building, most tenants were reluctant to speak to me. Or, if they did speak to me, it would turn out that the building did not meet the criteria of this research because of some exempting factor. After some months of this, I tried conducting the fieldwork with assistance from graduate students enrolled in the Master in Urban Planning and Policy Program of AUB, who were from Syria and Lebanon. This was a pivotal factor in the success of the fieldwork surveys, because the tenants were much more willing to speak with us as a group of students who spoke fluently in the language, instead of a single, American male. This was not a problem in the building that I live in at the time of this thesis because I have built good relationships with my neighbors – the other tenants.

Once my colleagues and I found the other four suitable buildings with tenants that responded to surveys, I compiled the data and managed to come in contact the landlords/representatives of three of the buildings on subsequent visits. Two of the landlords/representatives were available to speak on the property, but the other took some time to get in contact with. The landlord of my building (Building A) was entirely unwilling to speak to me in general, for reasons I will later explain, and the landlord of Building C was also unwilling to speak with me. Finally, using the resources of the Beirut Urban Lab, I requested copies of the property titles of each of the selected buildings to establish ownership histories and current dynamics. Using these titles, I was able to formulate appropriate interview questions for the landlords and analyze the ways in which ownership dynamics affected tenants.

2. Analyze and articulate the networks, profiles, and tactics of tenants.

Based upon the interviews I conducted with residents, landlords, and organizations in Geitawi and based upon the available literature and data surrounding urban precarity in Beirut (Fawaz et. al, 2021, August) and other cities in the Global South (Simone, 2014; Muñoz, 2018) this thesis will analyze the unequal power relationship between these tenants and landlords and how tenants confront this unequal dynamic to attempt to secure their housing.

3. Caveats and considerations

I translated the interviews from Arabic to English with the aid of friends and colleagues. As such, the meaning of certain words and the context may not be entirely translatable, although I have tried to be as faithful as possible to the words used in the interviews. Additionally, I am a white American, which surely affected how open some of the tenants and landlords were with me in conversations. But, through speaking with many people in the buildings, conducting field visits, and again, having assistance from other Lebanese and Syrian students (all of whom I owe a great debt for this research), I hope to have minimized the negative affect my position may have had in conversations. Still, it is important to note and consider in my analysis.

D. Thesis outline

In this chapter I have presented the research problem and my methodology. In the following chapter I will analyze the scholarly literature that I incorporated into my analysis of my findings and guided my research process. The third chapter introduces the five buildings I selected to research, including their physical conditions, the tenants, and the owners and landlords. The fourth chapter presents the uncertain and vulnerable conditions of the tenants occupying the buildings, based on interviews and on-the-ground fieldwork, including the primary drivers of the tenants' poor conditions. In the fifth chapter, I will analyze the primary finding and argument of this thesis: that landlords in Beirut wield asymmetrical power over their tenants, dictating the conditions of those tenants' living spaces, while tenants largely are powerless to negotiate the terms and conditions of their tenancy (especially if they are Syrian or migrants).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

I provide in this chapter a review of the scholarship this thesis uses as an analytical foundation, primarily relating to housing insecurity and uncertainty, which many scholars have defined as "urban precarity." I also will review the pertinent literature on housing discrimination and landlord power, and how this relates to Beirut. Firstly, I will cover how precarity can be understood and its relation to the urban. Secondly, why scholars have chosen precarity as an analytical lens, and their findings on the causes and effects of precarity related to housing. Thirdly, how capital consolidation and their concomitant legal frameworks in cities like Beirut has changed the urban fabric and created precarious populations. Fourthly, how discrimination and legal insecurity has also added to the precarity of populations in their housing. And finally, how precarious populations respond and react to their circumstances within the urban fabric.

A. What is precarity?

One of the primary conceptual frameworks this thesis will use to analyze the tenant populations is precarity. Recent literature published by scholars of the urban such as Brian Campbell, Christian Laheij, and Tasneem Siddiqui define precarity as a state in which populations have "tenuous access to resources and alliances," as well as insecurity caused by discrimination and lack of political rights (Campbell and Laheij, 2021, p. 286; Siddiqui, T. et al, 2020). Further specialized to the context of housing, precarity captures the

uncertainty felt by the populations experiencing it – about access to housing (and their ability to remain in said housing), the requirements they must meet (e.g., rent, behavior), future costs, and the spatial conditions (like utilities and lack of maintenance).

Because precarity is a manufactured state, the political-economic systems of cities and the nations they are situated in, along with exacerbating factors like discrimination, produce precarious conditions necessarily. Political and economic decisions, as well as legal decisions, create, or manufacture, a state of uncertainty that wouldn't exist otherwise. In other words, precarity is not a natural outcome of urbanization.

1. What is housing precarity?

The primary facet of housing precarity is uncertainty felt by the populations experiencing it. This manifests in uncertainty about access to housing (and their ability to remain in said housing), the requirements they must meet (e.g., rent), and the spatial conditions (like utilities and lack of maintenance).

The English-speaking urban planning literature has often approached low-income urban populations with terms such as "vulnerable" or "marginal." In this thesis, I have opted for the term "precarious" because I want to build on the work of urban scholars who study insecurity and uncertainty in housing. Additionally, beyond the metaphorical weight precarity carries, the term more aptly analyzes structures and forces that create insecurity in housing, as well as the feelings of uncertainty about the future and conditions that these populations experience.

Conversely, other terms may mask factors that are important to this study. For example, “marginality,” which has been used to describe the oppressed classes of cities in the past. While marginalization could also be a conscious manufactured process, it fails to completely describe the reality of urban development, implying that there are margins of cities that exist in outside the centers, and that there is a specific goal of the city that these populations do not conform to. Scholars such as Janice Perlman have contested marginality as a construct, arguing it is inaccurate in representing the experiences and forces present in the urban space (Perlman, 1976). On the contrary, populations labelled as “marginal” are often exploited social groups who work for low wages to serve elites in informal and menial jobs. They are a necessary component of modern cites and allow for the accumulation of capital by the wealthy and powerful. As such, I am favoring precarity as a relational concept in which population are understood to exist within the social and financial hierarchies.

Additionally, scholars like Perlman, Campbell and Laheij, have argued that in addressing and combating marginality, policymakers and the powerful often attempt to bring these groups under the umbrella of their framework of acceptable behavior and standards in the pursuit of “progress” (Campbell and Laheij, 2021, p. 295). While combatting precarity, and understanding it involves addressing the forces that produce their precarious positions more directly.

2. How do cities reproduce precarity?

In an ever-urbanizing world, it is important to understand how precarity is reproduced and accelerated through the unique structures of the urban and in housing. Decision-makers implement policies that are designed to attract capital investment in land and housing stocks, change the urban fabric into one where housing is not designed to be homes for the city residents but, rather, an asset to store wealth in. This creates a reduced housing stock and more competition for it. As Raquel Rolnik has argued, cities attempt to attract foreign investments and raise their profile in the international market of cities, and the urban fabric becomes molded to advertise to capital, rather than serve the needs of the people inhabiting the city (Rolnik, 2013). This means that the policies of the market and policymakers transforms the city's characteristics to cater to capital accumulation. But these precarious populations still exist and need housing. So, landowners with a financial interest in renting to them, because of their lack of rights and resources and because of the conditions of the housing, accommodate these populations in unequal and temporarily advantageous (to the landlord) ways (Dahdah, 2016). These buildings are dilapidated and continue to deteriorate because the landowners have no obligations to maintain them for these populations without rights and recourse.

Despite these housing conditions being seen as temporary for policymakers and perhaps residents themselves (Sheppard et. al, 2020), they change the way the city is formed and how its inhabitants live for decades (Gunter, 2014; Fawaz, 2009).

As Campbell and Laheij note, the city and the urban have not been the focal point of research until recently – the urban was merely a setting for analysis of the repercussions of

capitalist accumulation, instead of the object (Campbell and Laheij, 2021). So, for the purpose of this thesis, I will research how the characteristics of individuals and populations transform the fabric of the city, and the fabric of the city, in turn, affects these precarious populations. Janice Perlman work in Rio de Janeiro showed that populations thought to be living on the margins of the city in fact lived in and commuted, as well as shaped the structures of the city, and were necessary to it (Perlman, 1976).

B. How has housing precarity been studied?

1. Discrimination and precarity

Beyond the urban fabric itself, there is also evidence in scholarship from Lebanon and other cities in the Global South that one's legal status and conditions exacerbate housing precarity. One's status changes the terms of the contract, can lead to worse living conditions (physical conditions), and worse ability to resist eviction.

Scholars of the urban have only started to focus their research on cities in the Global South, as much of urban studies has been focused on cities in the Global North even up until the 2010s (Robinson, J., 2014). Housing precarity experienced by those in the Global South is magnified for populations excluded from government protection. In the case of Lebanon, refugees and migrant workers face a dilemma of being deprived of protections from the Lebanese Government and being discriminated against in the legal system, which often does not act as a neutral arbitrator in Lebanon. Instead, courts and judges can become actors in disputes or weaponized by individuals connected to them.

Discrimination in housing, which more relates to access instead of the treatment of tenants by landlords, has been extensively researched in the United States, with scholars determining a causal factor between discrimination and lower economic opportunities, housing precarity, and poor life outcomes (Roscigno, et al, 2009). Roscigno et. al argue that landlords play an outsized role in discrimination because they are face-to-face with the tenants and interact on a consistent basis. Franklin Obeng-Odoom's research is more relevant to the treatment aspect of discrimination that Lebanon faces. Obeng-Odoom describes in Ghana landlords having become a law unto themselves, they "run the show" in the real estate market of Ghana. They can change the rent, they can evict at will, and they particularly target migrants (Obeng-Odoom, 2014). He also reports on other cities, such as Port Harcourt in Nigeria similar situations of landlords exercising power over tenants in a discriminatory way.

Scholarship by Eva Rosen, Phillip Garboden, and Jennifer Cossyleon shows how landlords in four American cities use algorithms and personal prejudices to screen likely tenants for approval (Rosen et al., 2021). This well documented American trend of housing discrimination means that non-white applicants, as well as women and working to low-income people are approved at a lower rate than their counterparts. Their work shows that being a member of a discriminated group directly impacts one's ability to find and maintain stable housing.

Consequently, research in other neighborhoods in Lebanon had shown that the agreements landlords make with refugees and migrant workers have significantly fewer protections compared to the protections offered by the state to Lebanese tenants (Dahdah, 2016; Fawaz et al., 2014). It suggests that for this thesis I further compare refugees and

migrant workers to impoverished Lebanese families to understand the effects of this legal context. I specifically will search for any differences in rents, rental agreements, living conditions, and evictions in the sampled buildings for non-Lebanese compared to Lebanese populations.

2. Refugees and migrants: categorical fetishism and conceptual stretching

Because this thesis relies heavily on conversations with refugees and migrant workers, as well as analysis of literature and data on these groups, it is important to clarify, as Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis have observed, that "refugees" and "migrants" are not discrete categories and the experiences of people fleeing conflict, economic ruination, or other catastrophes are not simple. As the pair note, "…despite significant academic critique, continues to treat the categories 'refugee' and 'migrant' as if they simply exist, out there, as empty vessels into which people can be placed in some neutral ordering process…" (Crawley and Skleparis, 2017, pp. 49). Furthermore, this "category fetishization" they and other scholars have observed, is often a tool used by governments to delineate those "deserving" and "undeserving" of assistance.

Indeed, the Lebanese government specifically forbade the UNHCR from registering new Syrian refugees that arrived to the country after 2015. Additionally, whether or not they are registered with the UNHCR, Syrian refugees face discrimination, suspicion and hostile conditions because some Lebanese believe or claim that all Syrians receive large amounts of USD from UNHCR (which is untrue) (Fawaz et al., 2018).

3. Responses/mobilization to precarious conditions

How do city dwellers who are thrown into conditions of precarity respond/defend themselves? One hypothesis that scholars, like Ida Susser and Stéphane Tonnelat, put forward is that tenants may be able to mobilize to defend their rights (Susser and Tannelat, 2013). Although, the ever-expanding inequalities of neoliberal economies are more heightened in cities, the forces that produce these inequalities and precarity may be too complex to grasp and mobilize around (Susser and Tonnelat, 2013). Still, the inequalities produce anger and resentment, which the pair argue can be channeled into social movement.

Another approach considers networks of solidarity or mutual aid that tenants develop to stay in place. Abdoumaliq Simone's work in Johannesburg suggests that precarious individuals are in a constant state of maneuvering, trying to adapt to their surrounding conditions (Simone, 2004). Their conditions force the inhabitants of Johannesburg to form networks of social solidarity to cooperate, suggesting that precarious individuals confront the systems that immiserate them by forming systems of their own. It is important to stress the power and economic imbalance between precarious individuals and their networks, on the one hand, and the governments and private entities that contribute to their precarity, on the other. But Simone's work reifies the agency of the city-dwellers.

However, Solange Muñoz's work challenges the notion that broader urban precarity and inequality can be challenged by city-dwellers without adequate housing (Muñoz, 2018). She argues that the home, is the central unit of stability in city-dweller's lives

(Muñoz, 2018). Without access to a stable home and housing, the forces of capitalism that exploit the most precarious individuals cannot be challenged through individual or collective action. Housing in the urban space is the primary driver of precarity, but also can be a source of stability.

Tasneem Siddiqui et. al also add to the scholarship on precarity as it is experienced by migrants, who experience multidimensional insecurity – in their rights, material scarcity, and discrimination (Siddiqui, T. et al, 2020). Their work importantly recognizes that there exists a precarious class in every capitalist city, where workers subsist on the lowest-paid forms of labor. Migrants have the added precarity of lacking citizenship rights (and in some countries labor rights). These populations experience precarity and crisis differently, and the tools available to them to address their precarity also fall in differing realms. As such, it is important to my research that I contrast the differing responses and tools of the different classes of people living in the selected buildings.

C. Relationship of capital consolidation to the urban fabric and urban power structures

Since the 19th Century, cities have been the accumulation centers of capitalism, as well as their steering points. As such, they hyper-focus and accelerate the problems of unequal capital accumulation and power structures that have been created to bolster this accumulation (Harvey, 1992). Crises are also endemic to capitalism; collapse of markets or currencies has been observed the world over for more than a century. The 2008 economic recession – sparked by the securitization of housing assets in the United States – portends the collapse of similar highly-securitized markets in other countries (Rolnik, 2013; Fields,

2018). This implies that one needs to link housing precarity to actual transformations in the urban fabric.

Urban researchers such as Raquel Rolnik have traced this general trend in the world economy toward financialization of housing and transforming housing from a traditional asset in private hands an investment vehicle for huge firms and conglomerates (Rolnik, 2013). Additionally, researchers have argued that this trend has transformed housing from a right of individuals, into a right of capital owners (Marcuse, 2009). Cities like Beirut are being transformed from a livable space for its inhabitants, into a store of value in land and property units for wealthy investors.

Lebanon has followed this trend in global finance at an accelerated rate, through laws and policies introduced since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 (Ashkar, 2015). The new Lebanese "Law on Rent" that took effect in 1992, revised and removed rent controls allowing for rents to be subject to market forces. Contracts made under the previous rent law that were rent controlled were grandfathered into the new law. But these rental contracts were severely devalued due to inflation and prompted landowners to circumvent them by demolishing the buildings containing units protected by the previous provisions or skirting the law in other ways to force "old rent" tenants out (Ashkar, 2015). This string of demolitions and new construction saw a wave of wealthy individuals, expats, foreigners, and investors buy-up units in the Beirut area in the up-scale high-rises, inflating the cost of living in the city. The developers are not required to pay property taxes on these vacant buildings or lots, so demolishing and building high-rises with units that sit empty is unpenalized, and these units are a stable asset with no financial risk as a result (Krijnen and Fawaz, 2010; Fawaz, Krijnen, and El Samad, 2017).

D. The Informal as a Framework of Transaction

Since at least the early 1970s, urban researchers have traced the growing trend of unaffordable housing and responses to it that circumvent government control — what has been widely called "informality" (Peattie, 1987). Because the term, as Lisa Peattie argues, is ill-defined and describes a number of trends and phenomena, I specify that for this thesis I will focus on informal frameworks of transaction. Scholars have disagreed about whether informal practices should be celebrated or condemned. Faranak Miraftab argues that informality is not only a natural result of exclusionary policies but is one node of resistance employed by residents against forces that produce their precarity in the urban space. So rather than decrying informality as an illegal blight on cities, she sees it as a positive act (Rolnik, 2013; Miraftab, 2009).

However, as scholars like Mona Fawaz and Ananya Roy have argued, informal transactions can deliberately be used by city authorities to unmap and unclarify laws and policies because it allows them to make their own decisions, commodify land and facilitate capital exchange. and turn the urban space into a tool of exclusion, where it is only available to members of the bourgeoisie and capital owners (Roy, 2009; Fawaz, 2017). Studying informality in a framework of transactions, as exists in Lebanon, thus becomes a way to better understand housing transactions in relation to power and economic relations.

Informality can also manifest on the ground in property transaction, rental agreements, and deeds that fall outside of the prevue of the state, but still have a logic and socially recognized legitimacy. This type of informality can be caused by the city authorities, as Fawaz and Roy argue, or the buyer/seller of housing wishing to circumvent regulation, which would make the transaction either impossible (because the tenant or

landlord is breaking the law in some way) or more costly (Dahdah, 2016). The five buildings I studied for this research were no different – every tenant had an informal agreement with the landlord.

E. The relationship of power between landlords and tenants

Scholars of cities in both the Global North and South have recently published work that analyzed the relationship between landlords and tenants in cities from Ireland to South Africa. Ashley Gunter observed that in the informal market of Johannesburg, landlords had an asymmetrical power relationship with tenants where they could impose arbitrary rental terms with impunity (Gunter, 2014). In Ireland, where the housing market has some regulation – less so than in the 1990s because of a series of market liberalizing laws – landlords often skirt regulation and laws and retaliate against tenants who report illegal behavior, according to research by Michael Byrne and Rachel McArdle (Byrne and McArdle, 2022). Ireland's rental sector is tight, just like Beirut's is, which affords more power to landlords who can blacklist tenants who file complaints so that those tenants have a much more difficult time securing housing with other landlords in the future.

F. Conclusion

The related literature emphasizes the importance of analyzing the structural factors that produce housing precarity and poor tenant conditions. Further, it points to the role that landlords play in discrimination and prompts further scrutiny of the power relationship between the landlord and tenant. Because markets play an outsized role in contributing to

precarity in modern cities, capital consolidation and its role in transforming cities from places to live into places to extract wealth, guided my research in this thesis.

Additionally, understanding informal modes of accessing shelter and the power relations that informality produces, especially for especially vulnerable (or precarious) groups was crucial to this research.

CHAPTER III

CASE STUDY: GEITAWI, BEIRUT, AND THE CITYSCAPE

In the following chapter, I will provide an overview of the physical characteristics of the five buildings I studied, the characteristics of the tenants, and descriptions of the landlords. All five buildings are located in Geitawi – a historic neighborhood in Beirut based around a hospital of the same name, as well as St. George Hospital. The neighborhood contains a variety of buildings constructed from the early 20th Century to the present, but the largest divide is between buildings built before the civil war and those built

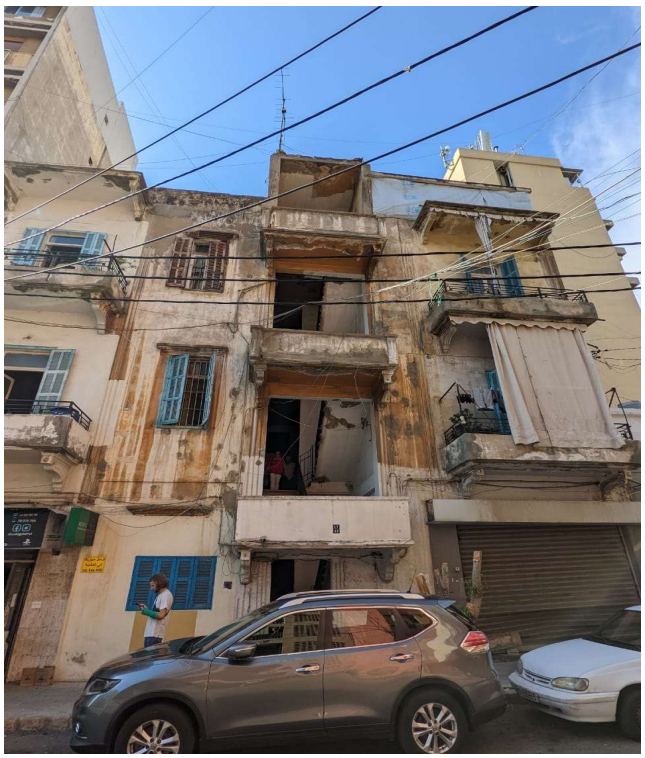

Figure 3: The facade of Building D

after. Between expensive high rises built in 2015, you will find 4-6 story apartment buildings built in the 1960s or earlier. These are the types of buildings I have selected for my research. There are several factors that pushed me to select this typology, the most prominent being that I live in one (which is one of the buildings I studied). My own experiences negotiating with the landlord and seeing my neighbors try to do the same ignited an interest in these buildings and their function within the fabric of Beirut. Additionally, I observed that these buildings are generally the most affordable in the area, and as such have a tenant population that is mixed between nationalities, and their landlords tend to rent to tenants informally, which I observed causes a host of problems for the tenants.

The five buildings I have selected as case studies share this typology in that they were constructed before the Lebanese Civil War, are 4-6 stories in height, besides Building C, and have a mixed occupancy between Lebanese, Syrian refugees, migrant workers, and western tenants. I hypothesized that the fact that residents were both unequal to each other and their landlords would yield insights into how tenant precarity manifests and is reproduced in these types of buildings.

A. Selected Buildings

1. Physical overview of the selected buildings.

Most of the five buildings I selected were built before 1960, with the oldest – Building D — being built in 1935. Besides Building C, which is a conglomeration of 2 large houses that have been sectioned into smaller apartments, the buildings are 4-6 stories

in height and contain between 10 and 16 apartments. They are largely in a state of disrepair and neglect as the facades and interiors have seen only minor upgrades since they were built – mostly spot fixes and repainting. Much of the electrical wiring is exposed outside of the buildings, and the toilets, bathrooms, and kitchens of many of the apartments are inadequate, dirty, and disintegrating. Tenants have made some minor fixes, if they can afford to, and landlords hide the problems with fresh coats of paint and temporary fixes if an apartment is vacant and they want to rent it.

Figure 4: Facade of Building B

Figure 5: Facade of Building E

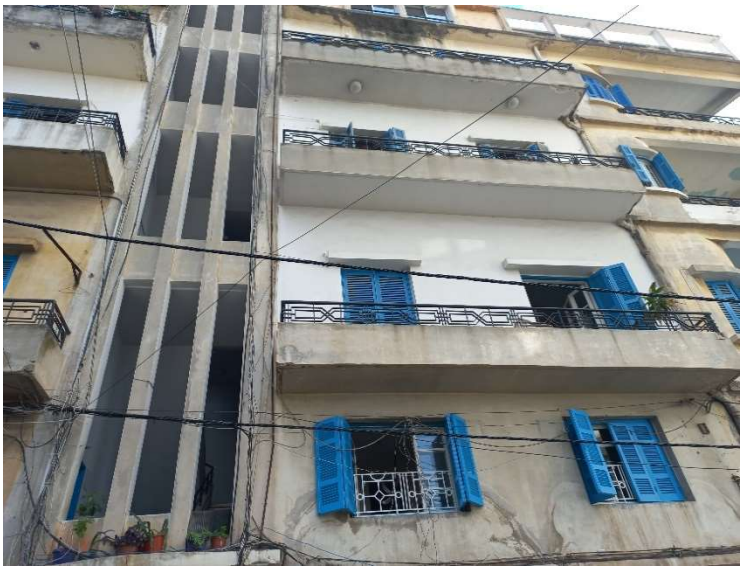

Figure 6: Facade of Building A

Figure 7: View of the central courtyard of Building A

Because of their location, the five buildings were squarely within the blast radius of the 2020 Beirut Port explosion[3] and received extensive damage to windows, furniture, and facades. The Lebanese Military and various NGO's paid to fix some of this damage, but the effects of the blast could still be readily seen at the time of research. The paint the military applied to Building E was already fading and peeling less than two years after application, according to Tenant 2. Each apartment has its own ad hoc water system and tanks scattered around or on top of the buildings because the municipality of Beirut does not consistently supply the city with water. This causes its own set of issues as the tanks sometimes leak or break and water flows into the living areas or damages other structures of the buildings as was the case with Building A, B and C.

Figure 8: Building B ground floor and the façade of one part of Building C

[3] The explosion occurred on August 4, 2020, when a large amount of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded in the Port of Beirut causing the deaths of 218 people, injuring thousands and displacing more than 300,000.

The layouts of the apartments range from one bedroom with a bathroom and kitchen in the smaller section, to three bedrooms with multiple bathrooms, a kitchen, and balconies. Parts of the rooves are covered in tarps to protect the interiors from water leakage in the damaged sections. Some of the buildings have informally sectioned apartments built with tarp and plywood or sheet metal.

Figure 9: Informally sectioned apartment in Building B

2. The Tenants

Figure 8 offers a breakdown of the tenants in relation to the buildings.

Building	Number of Apartments	Population	Building Representative	Live-in Landlord
A	16	Mixed	No	No
B	~12 (with extra rooms rented)	Mixed, mostly Syrian and migrant workers	Yes	No
C	~6	Syrian	No	No
D	10	Mixed, mostly Lebanese	No	Yes
E	13	Mixed	Yes	No

Figure 10: General information about the selected buildings

3. The Landlords, Owners, and Representatives

For clarity's sake, I will use "owner" in this thesis to mean someone who owns shares in the respective buildings but does not interact with tenants or manage the affairs of the building. While "landlord" will refer to someone who has an ownership stake in the building and has a hand in managing tenants, or the affairs of the building. Finally, a "representative" has no ownership stake in the building and instead receives payment from an owner to collect rent, interact with tenants, or manage the building in some other form.[4]

[4] The term "representative" points to the individual hired by the property owner to manage the property and collect the rent. In Arabic, the individual was referred to in my case studies as *wakeel.* In other

The ownership of all five buildings is complex because they are all held in split shares by multiple claimants. Lebanon's legal framework for property ownership divides buildings, lots, apartments, and other landed assets into shares.[5] In each of the five selected buildings, the ownership shares are mostly split between siblings in the same families, who inherited the shares from their parents. Building B and E also have owners with shares from different families that were purchased instead of inherited. The owners of all selected buildings are Lebanese citizens, although some resided outside the country at the time of my research. The multiplicity of owners complicates the organization of buildings, since owners may not agree on how to manage rents, and they are unable to clarify jurisdiction as long as the property is shared.

The management of rent differs across the five cases. In the case of Building A and C, a son of the original owners is the landlord for each building, respectively. In Building A, this landlord negotiates agreements with tenants, collects rents, and checks on the building regularly. In Building C, the landlord only comes to collect rents and dictate new rates once a month. They are both referred to as "صحب الملك" in Arabic (Saahib Am-milik), which closely translates to property owner.

buildings in Beirut, other terms have been used (e.g., Natoor, mas2ool). The term often differs according to the status of the individual.

[5] The Lebanese property law divides all landed properties into 2,400 shares that can be held by one or hundreds of shareholders. Although recent laws mandate that all apartment buildings reorganize and divide property so that each apartment is a single property unit, numerous old buildings –including all those in my sample- are not divided and hence all apartments are held in shares by multiple individuals. This confuses responsibility since shares are not spatially allocated.

In Building B, the owners do not intervene directly with the tenants. Instead, one of the inheritors hired a "وكيل" (wakeel), which can be translated to agent or representative, to collect rents and oversee the building on the family's behalf. The representative is a Lebanese business owner who owns a convenience store in the neighborhood, and has expanded his business portfolio by managing four other apartment buildings in the area, including Building B. All the buildings he manages are on the same block where his store is located. According to him and the tenants, he is very strict and keeps a close watch on how many people are in tenants' apartments and their behavior through security cameras, and has used intimidation and force to evict tenants in the past.

Building E also has a representative of the landlord, but in the form of a lawyer hired by the majority owner (who resides outside of the country) in 2008 and the primary individual that tenants interact and negotiate with. The lawyer lives near Beirut and has been managing properties for landlords for about 20 years.

Building D's ownership situation is similar to the Building A, B, and C, in that shares are split between siblings of the same family. Two of the owners live in an apartment in the building and are the primary landlords. One of the other owners of Building D – a sibling of one of the landlords – recently returned from living outside of the country and began becoming involved in managing the building, although she does not reside in it. At the time of my interviews, the landlords of Building D and this sibling were fighting amongst themselves over the management of the building (primarily rental prices).

B. Chapter Conclusion:

Having mapped the actors and buildings in this chapter, I will expand upon what it is like to live in these buildings and interact with the landlords and representatives, according to conversations I had with the tenants.

CHAPTER IV

TENANTS' EXPERIENCES

This chapter profiles the experiences of the tenants renting apartments in the studied large-scale residential buildings. It begins by highlighting the fragile and uncertain, or precarious, conditions in which tenants dwell before it looks to explain some of the determinants that explain their conditions. The chapter argues that although they are unequal, tenants all face difficult conditions and have limited room for recourse against their landlords or representatives, most notably because of the nature of the market and absence of state protection.

A. Tenants' Conditions

The three main factors that respondents reported as contributing negatively to their living conditions were overcrowding and physical dilapidation, precarious and uncertain conditions of tenancy, and being forced to forgo necessities to afford rental payments.

1. Overcrowding and physical dilapidation

The tenants occupying the selected buildings and buildings with similar typologies in Beirut generally live in poor conditions. One of their primary complaints was water leaks that render apartments damp, humid, and moldy. Some of the tenants in Buildings A, B, and C reported major problems with water leaking into the living areas. Tenant 1, who rents a single room in Building B, said there is "water coming down the walls (Tenant 1,

Building B, personal communication, September 29, 2022).” The water pools near his bed on the floor. Tenants in Building C also complained of water leaking from their rooves into their living space, which was made worse by the fact that one of the families sleeps in what was originally an attic. The landlords in these apartments rarely make repairs, or superficially mask problems with the building, according to tenants.

Figure 11: Water damage in the ceiling can be seen under the roof of Building B

For tenants like the Syrian refugees in Building C, who can't afford to make significant repairs themselves, this means patching leaks with tarps and suffering through rainstorms Tenant 2 in Building C, when asked if any Lebanese people live in the building, responded, "No. No one can live. In the winter water leaks down from the roof into the house (Tenant 2, Building C, personal communication, September 30, 2022)." Tenant 3 of the same building reported that the landlord doesn't make any repairs. In Building A, Tenant W has the skills and resources to repair his apartment but repairing the apartment himself means free labor for the landlord, as the landlord doesn't (and still doesn't) compensate tenants for repairs.

> "It's all money talk. And he doesn't want to invest or fix or do or bring somebody to clean stuff. I mean, it's a nice house but I made it nice. When I got it, it was bullshit. It was falling apart, and I had to repaint the walls, do everything, do the wiring of the electricity. And it's for his own benefit. I'm not gonna leave and take it with me." – Tenant W, Building A, personal communication, September 19, 2022

Another recurrent issue is overcrowding, where multiple families are forced to occupy the same apartment (often one room), especially among the Syrian refugees. In Building C every apartment is occupied by more than one family, and in Building D three families share the same apartment. Single families can't afford rental prices on their own, so extended families or friends crowd small apartments.

2. Precarity and uncertainty.

No matter the building, all the Syrian refugees and migrant workers reported having trouble paying the rent, and most had trouble finding cheaper apartments. Some Lebanese also reported trouble paying for rent, like Tenant R in Building A, but she was in a better position to counteract the demands of the landlord and had some family to fall back on. For most of the tenants that live in extreme precarity, not acquiescing to the demands of the landlord puts them at risk of homelessness because of the difficulty of finding affordable apartments in the city. Tenant 1 in Building C said of her husband and herself, "We're looking for a new place, but everything is in dollars (Tenant 1, Building C, personal communication, September 30, 2022)."

Despite the threat of eviction that they feel and the high levels of uncertainty, the interviews showed that many households had occupied the spaces for an extended period – none less than 2 years. Even so, every tenant knew a neighbor who was either evicted or left because they were unable to afford their rent.

> "…Every day, the landlord raises the rent. This is why he doesn't make contracts." – Tenant 2, Building B, personal communication, September 29, 2022

None of the tenants I spoke with have a formal contract, rather each had an oral agreement with the landlord to rent the apartment at a certain price. However, the landlords frequently change this rental price and tenants have little recourse, especially if the tenant has no documentation these agreements such as payment receipts. Lebanese law recognizes the validity of oral agreements as binding contracts, but the onus is on the tenant to prove that an oral agreement was made at a certain time and for a certain price. According to

Article 543 of the Code of Obligations and Contracts, a landlord cannot raise rent unless the tenant agrees before a period of three years from the start of the agreement. The law also, in a functional system, would protects tenants from eviction, threats, and other coercive action taken by landlords.[6] In practice, however, these laws are rarely, if ever enforced and with the Lebanese state being bankrupted by the economic crisis, enforcement or protection of tenants is almost non-existent.

In practice, most tenants (and landlords) are unaware of the law and are afraid of eviction if they don't pay rental increases. The fear and uncertainty are blurred further in the case of Syrian refugees who reside in the country without residency permits or up-to-date registration with UNHCR; even if they seek legal assistance and know their rights, lawyers and NGOs may not be able to help them. In Building D, Tenant 2 said "We talked to the NGO and they asked for out papers, but our paper are expired. And we didn't hear back from them. So, we can either pay $200 or leave this month (Tenant 2, Building D, personal communication, September 30, 2022)." I will expand on this further as I outline the reasons for the tenants' precarious positions.

3. Forgoing of basic necessities to afford rent

Many tenants reported that they forgo food and basic necessities in order to afford their rental payments, and even the money saved sometimes isn't enough. In Building C, where multiple families split the rent on their apartment, the tenants are still forced to forgo

[6] https://housingmonitor.org/en/content/resolving-rental-disputes-legal-tools-adopted-housing-monitor-mitigate-landlord-tenant

necessities. Tenant 1 said that the family rarely eats fruits and vegetables, and her children do not go to school because the family cannot afford the private academies near by.

> "My child has asthma, and we are trying to get the medicine but we can't afford it. My husband has a disk problem and needs a surgery, but we can't afford it. He can't go to work sometimes because of it (Tenant 1, Building C, personal communication, September 30, 2022)."

Tenant 2 in Building D said they often have to borrow money to make rental payments and "For seven months the kids haven't drunk milk or eaten eggs (Tenant 2, Building D, personal communication, September 30, 2022)."

Figure 12: Part of Building C, where water damage can be seen in the roof area

B. Tenants are unequal

Although all the tenants that spoke with me were precarious in some form, some tenants experienced greater precarity and worse living conditions. The two primary determinants that provided some benefit in negotiations with the landlord, the tenants explained, were length of occupancy and citizenship (Lebanese citizens were in a better position to negotiate their staying-in-place).

1. Long term residents can have an advantage.

Familiarity with the landlord may make negotiation easier in some cases. In Building A, Tenant S, who is Sudanese and has been living in his apartment for 15 years said, "I want to tell you something, if you lived here for a long time, it [negotiating] would be different than if you are new (Tenant S, Building A, personal communication, August 31, 2022)." He said he was nice to the landlord and the landlord gave him some leniency in late rental payments. Tenant S and his flat mates continue to pay in LL, but in the same building, an Egyptian tenant was evicted ostensibly for not being able to pay in USD. The landlord had made the same deal to accept LL as with the Sudanese tenants, but one day decided to renege and kick the Egyptian out.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact difference between these two examples, but the Sudanese tenants had a better and longer relationship with the landlord which may have factored into the decision. More evidence pointing to this fact comes from the same building, where Tenant R, who is Lebanese and has been living in the building for 18 years, refused to meet the landlord's demand of payment in dollars ($500 for her apartment and shop). "My husband told him 'I will give you 4 million [LL], and if you don't want it, go

sue us'… He [the landlord] didn't take the money this month (Tenant R, Building A, personal communication, June 22, 2022)." The landlord hasn't evicted her and is still trying to get her to pay in dollars as of the end of 2022.

2. Lebanese are better off than foreigners

Tenant R's experience also evidences the fact that Lebanese in a better position, generally than refugees and migrant workers. When asked if the landlord had evicted anyone in Building A, Tenant R said, "Yes, but not Lebanese. There were Syrians here and another one [Egyptian] above my shop (Tenant R, Building A, personal communication, June 22, 2022)." As I will further explain, this may be a result of legal residency and supportive networks, which foreigners may not have. Tenant W of Building A, also Lebanese, was threatened with eviction for his role in trying to organize the tenants of the building to negotiate with the landlord. But, eventually, because of Tenants W's recalcitrance and unwillingness to leave, the landlord conceded and allowed him to stay.

C. What makes the conditions so bad?

The precarity of these tenants, which is marked by high levels of uncertainty about their ability to stay in place, as individual experiences that is caused and explained largely by the housing market in Lebanon and the absence of recourse for the tenants.

1. The Market

Lebanon's housing market is extremely volatile since the economic crisis that drastically devalued the currency, causing landlords to raise rents to recoup losses. The notion of a "fair" or feasible rent (for the tenant) is constantly shifting and is often influenced by rumor, e.g., "the United Nations gives Syrian refugees dollars;" "other landlords are being paid by their tenants in dollars;" "rental prices should be higher than what they are." This may cause them to ask their tenants to pay impossible rents.

> "It's basically what made the shift was the gentrification and the change of price because of the foreigners and the brokers. And the real estate companies that find a house like this. And maybe he got offered by somebody, and when they find out that they [the tenants] are paying 300, they [the brokers] said it's worth more. So, he [the landlord] would have this idea in his head."
> – Tenant W, Building A, personal communication, September 19, 2022

Here Tenant W is describing why the landlord of Building A suddenly, at the beginning of 2022, began asking every tenant for payment in cash USD. It's true that Geitawi, and municipal Beirut in general, is home to foreigners from the west like me who bring or get paid in USD, but the vast majority of Beirut's population does not receive their salaries in USD. Additionally, the quality of the building and apartments in Building A does not warrant this price, as evidenced by Tenant W and another set of tenants. These tenants were French and Lebanese and occupied an apartment in the building for more than 2 years, with some tenants moving out and some staying. Finally in December of 2022, when the landlord asked for $400 per month, the group refused and voluntarily left the building.

Landlords and representatives are keenly aware of both the price of other apartments in Beirut and the minimum salaries of their tenants. Through personal calculations, a rent is reached that the landlord believes the tenant should pay. As Tenant S in Building A relates, "For sure next year he's [landlord] gonna ask for more money because the situation is going to change. Now people maybe get salaries of 300 dollars. Next year they may get 600 dollars. He's gonna ask for more money of course (Tenant S, Building A, personal communication, August 31, 2022)."

The representative of the landlord of Building B, who was given the responsibility of imposing rents by one of the owners, also confirmed that his calculation is constantly updated as conditions change.

> "I know the market and I know the rent. I ask a lot of questions of the renters; it depends on their work and this sort of thing."
> – Representative, Building B, personal communication, September 29, 2022)

This might seem like a fair system at a glance – an income-based payment system of sorts. But, in reality, the landlord's assessments are specious and myopic. Tenants must pay an enormous amount of expenses (relative to their salaries), in addition to rent, to provide themselves with the necessities of living. Expenses for electrical generators, water, food, and supplies for repairs fall on the tenants' shoulders and are only increasing as the LL continues to be devalued. These expenses in most cases are comparable or more than the rent of the apartment.

Additionally, because the buildings have multiple owners and representatives, the rent calculation of one owner might be challenged by another owner, as was the case in Building D.

> "…the landlord who lived here was nice… the owner's sister came from America, and she didn't accept this rent and raised it. This month either we leave, or we pay $200 fresh [in cash]."
> - Tenant 2, Building D, personal communication, September 30, 2022

This adds another level of uncertainty to the tenants precarity, as they have no assurances that the rent agreed upon by one owner will be respected, or if another owner will suddenly want more money.

2. The cost of moving is high.

Beirut's housing market is very tight, especially for low-income Lebanese, Syrian refugees, and migrant workers. Many can't find cheaper or better apartments in areas near work, or their children's schools, for months. As Tenant 2 in Building E replied, when asked where his family would go if they couldn't make rental payments, "Nowhere. Sleep on the street? No, I couldn't go anywhere. I pay the rent. I work in this area; the school is here (Tenant, 2 Building E, personal communication, September 13, 2022)."

Even in neighborhoods farther away from the city's core that are home to many low-income tenants and refugees, like the neighborhood of Naabaa, problems with landlords and unfeasible rents still exists. As Tenant 2 in Building D said, "We're looking for a place already. There are some relatives in Naabaa, but it's the same situation (Tenant 2, Building D, personal communication, September 30, 2022)."

a. Few landlords are willing to rent to Syrian refugees and migrant workers

The market of landlords willing to rent to Syrian refugees and migrant workers is smaller than the broader market of "affordable," or least expensive, housing in Beirut. Those that are willing to rent to Syrian refugees often do so because of their precarious nature – they can be evicted quickly and without contestation, as many are fearful to challenge landlords about conditions or rents because of their status in the country. This means that an owner of an old, dilapidated building, like the 5 profiled in this thesis, can forgo the costs of renovations or upgrades, which are required by Lebanese law (though broadly not enforced), knowing Syrian or migrant workers will be forced to accept their conditions because they have little other option in the market. Tenant 3 of Building C said her family only speaks with the owner when he comes to collect rent, "he doesn't fix anything (Tenant 3, Building C, personal communication, September 30, 2022)."

b. Prevalence of unbinding agreements

The lack of binding contracts for these tenants means the terms of their tenancy are constantly negotiated and keep changing, leading to a high level of future uncertainty. But as previously stated, landlords in these types of buildings generally do not give contracts, especially since the start of Lebanon's economic crisis, which continues to devalue the LL. For some tenants this means that their rent has increased up to seven or eight times the original amount since 2019, as is the case with Tenant 2 in Building B. She was paying 250,000 LL per month for her apartment 5 years ago and at the time of the interview was asked to pay more than 1.5 million. Even if the landlords did give tenants contracts, the

criminalization of Syrians and the lack of recourse through the state would make fighting breaches of contract difficult, if not impossible, especially given the current crisis.

3. Absence of Recourse against the landlord

For most of the tenants, fighting the demands of landlords and representatives was difficult, if not impossible given the absence of state institutions. In this section I will cover how the courts are not an option for all tenants, Lebanon's criminalization of Syrians further disincentivizes resistance, and how those without proper residency are more vulnerable. Also, how some of the tenants use other means to negotiate their staying in place, like trying to build a good rapport with the landlord, obstinance, or using repairs as bargaining chips.

a. <u>The court is not an option, particularly when someone is in illegal status.</u>

Lebanese judges have been on strike continuously from August of 2022 through December 2022, meaning that any disputes tenants have would be added to a long list of cases and likely to be dismissed. The costs of hiring a lawyer also prevents tenants from taking legal action, should the courts begin operating again. Lebanese law also puts the burden of proof of contractual arrangement on the tenant, and with verbal agreements, if tenant don't have receipts or other evidence, the landlord can claim that they are squatters and evict, and tenants have no recourse.

This happened when an Egyptian migrant worker in Building A — my building — was evicted in April of 2022, his door chained and locked by the landlord because he

couldn't pay in USD. I contacted The Housing Monitor, a local NGO that assists tenants in disputes with landlords, including through legal channels, who put me in contact with a lawyer. The landlord hadn't given the tenant any payment receipts, so the lawyer informed me there was nothing to be done and the tenant would have to leave because he could not prove a verbal agreement was reached.

b. Criminalization of Syrians

For Syrians, the Lebanese state has systematically criminalized their presence making them both fearful of conflict with the landlord and stripping them of their rights (Saghieh et al., 2020). So, even if the courts were functioning, many of the tenants don't have the right to take their landlord to court because the state has ruled that they are present in Lebanon illegally. Tenant 2 in Building D, whose family are Syrian refugees said that they spoke with the Housing Monitor. "They [The Housing Monitor] asked for out papers, but our papers are expired. And we didn't hear back from them. So, we can either pay $200 or leave this month (Tenant 2, Building D, personal communication, September 30, 2022)." The fact that the tenants should be protected by Lebanese contract law is irrelevant because they are in the country illegally, according to the state. Even if NGO's want to help, their lawyers can do little if the landlord wants to evict.

c. Foreigners are more vulnerable to eviction

Lebanese tenants have an advantage because of their citizenship, although, legally, citizens and non-citizens should be treated equally. The Lebanese tenants I spoke with were granted more leniency and didn't face forceful evictions like the Egyptian tenant in Building A or Syrian tenant in Building C. As stated previously, Tenant R, who has lived in Building A for more than 18 years and is Lebanese, said no Lebanese tenants were ever forcefully evicted. "There were Syrians here [that were evicted] and another one [Egyptian] above my shop (Tenant R, Building A, personal communication, June 22, 2022)."

Tenant R's case is also illustrative of how Lebanese citizens may not be subject to the same force and intimidation as their foreign counterparts. She, like the Egyptian tenant, refuses to pay the landlord of Building A in USD. "He ordered that I pay $300 in cash. He said, 'your rent is $500.' My husband told him 'I will give you 4 million, and if you don't want it go sue us (Tenant R, Building A, personal communication, June 22, 2022).'" Since August of 2022, Tenant R has stopped paying the landlord entirely due to animosity between the two, and as of the end of 2022, he has not evicted her. Additionally, Tenant W in the same building, who is Lebanese, was also threatened with eviction because he wouldn't pay a rental increase of close to 300 percent – from 2 million LL to $300. "I tried 4 million [Lira, about $150 at the time] for 2 months and I just finally accepted (Tenant W, Building A, personal communication, September 19, 2022)."

d. Tenants are unaware of groups that could help them and are not organized amongst themselves

Besides only two tenants I spoke with, the rest were unaware of any groups or organizations that could help them in negotiations with the landlord or if they were threatened with eviction. When asked who they could turn to if they had problems with the landlord, the most common answer was friends. Tenant 2 in Building E said he knew "Maybe one or two people that I could call on the phone. If they have money, they will help. Then I would tell them after a week I could pay them back. I've done the same for them in the past. If they don't have money, I gave it to them (Tenant 2, Building E, personal communication, September 13, 2022)."

Many of the residents had a cordial relationship with their neighbors, but only one, Tenant W in Building A, had tried to organize the tenants to negotiate with the landlord. His efforts ultimately failed.

> "Initially I was the one who was trying to talk to the neighbors and solidarity and have a fixed rent. And in the end, it was brought to him that I was trying to organize people. So, he hated me. That's why he was like "I'm not renting to you anymore."
> - Tenant W, Building A, personal communication, September 19, 2022

The reason Tenant W's organizing failed was, as he alluded to, that some tenants informed the landlord. In Building A, tenants have tried to build a relationship with the landlord as a form of security, because they have no recourse, and informing the landlord of problem tenants is a common occurrence presumably to build good will between the informer and the landlord.

e. Building a relationship with the landlord

Tenant S, in Building A said that the landlord doesn't treat tenants differently "if you stay out other people's business." For example, not making a lot of noise or bothering other people. He also said complaints about the state of the building would also mark you as a target for the landlord. Because the landlord has so much power and little recourse is available to tenants, Tenant S said knowing the landlord was important to him.

> "If our rent is 2 million and he asks for 500k more, it's better that I pay than to find a new apartment because [there] I will be new, and the landlord won't know me."
> - Tenant S, Building A, personal communication, August 31, 2022

This points to a sense of security that some tenants feel with their relationships with the landlords. So, for Tenant S, even though the landlord of Building A raises rents frequently and has evicted tenants in the past, placating the landlord is better than risking a new one who could be worse.

f. Room for defiance

The ability and willingness of tenants to defy the wishes of the landlord seemed to be tied to their relative power. Tenants with Lebanese citizenship or residency were more likely to attempt obstinance as a tactic of negotiation, although the Syrian residents of Building D were an exception (they did not have up-to-date registration with UNHCR, but still reached out to the Housing Monitor for help).

> "And since about a year ago, he's been asking for dollars -- $300. In the beginning he wanted more. There was a time when he wouldn't accept the money and he didn't want to rent to me. I was like "I'm not leaving."
> - Tenant W, Building E, personal communication, September 19, 2022

Eventually, after a few months of trying to pay his usual rent, Tenant W conceded and paid the $300. So, his obstinance might have allowed him to stay in the apartment, but the landlord received his asking price in the end.

Another interesting form of defiance, or negotiation, that has yet to be deployed came from Tenant E in Building E. He had originally rented the apartment because the representive/landlord gave him what he thought was a good rental rate, but with the caveat that the apartment was in a state of severe disrepair.

> "I think the last guy had a big fight with the lawyer and the landlord…But all the trees in the garden were cut down to the stumps and he just threw these reeds, and they were piled up with random trash from the kitchen and someone threw their cigarette, and it caught fire. One of the reasons I got a cheap rate [because of cleaning that up]. There was also black mold."
> - Tenant E, Building E, personal communication, June 21, 2022

He then went on to say that he planned to use the fact that he had been cleaning the apartment as a cudgel against the landlord when he proposed to raise the rent, even purposefully leaving some windows broken and walls unrepaired as a bargaining chip.

D. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that the tenants in the studied buildings live in dilapidated conditions where their ability to maintain their shelter is uncertain. Some also forgo necessities like medicine and food to be able to afford the to maintain their shelter. This chapter also highlights that the tenants are unequal in their ability to negotiate for their

shelter, with Lebanese and long-term residents (in some cases) having an advantage in negotiations with landlords.

The two primary causes of the tenants' generally precarious conditions are the tight rental market for affordable housing in Lebanon, as well as a general inability of the tenants to check the demands of the landlord. Those tenants in a relatively better position vis-à-vis the landlord, have some room for defiance, but the effectiveness of these acts is usually temporary or have yet to be tested.

CHAPTER V

THE POWER OF THE LANDLORD

This chapter will analyze and present how and why the landlords (or their representatives) in the studied buildings and elsewhere in Beirut have so much power to set terms of tenancy.[7] It will also present some of the tactics landlords use to exercise power over their tenants to extract more wealth and police behavior. The power imbalance and wealth extraction tactics are not new, rather, as I would like to highlight again, Lebanon's economic collapse has heightened the power disparity between landlord and tenant because what little protective state institutions that existed before the crisis, have fallen into insolvency and impotence.

A. The landlord is the sole arbiter, sets the terms.

Lebanese law prizes and protects property rights above tenants' right to housing. As such, landlords, even before the crisis, were given extreme leeway to manage their properties and set terms of tenancy. Municipalities generally did not intervene to uphold laws regarding building maintenance and tenancy. Tenants with the knowledge of their rights, and who resided in the country legally, could — in theory — file suit against a

[7] Moving forward, "landlord" points to the individual dealing directly with tenants, even when I don't say *or representative*. The person can be the property owner or, as the thesis shows, can also be a hired "manager" –referred to as *wakeel* in Arabic in these buildings.

landlord over a dispute. But this costly and lengthy process was out of the reach of most tenants like the ones I spoke with. In 2022, the process is nonexistent.

Placing the power of arbitration solely in the hands of the landlord means tenants have little recourse if the landlord wants to increase rents, evict, or refuses to perform necessary repairs. Also, as an addendum, the interviews also showed that the landlords and representatives were not *all* malicious or vindictive in their treatment of tenants. A few offered leniency in rental payments and were open to negotiation. However, this was the exception, and even lenient landlords' sympathies wear thin, which leaves tenants with little protection. Plus, even if the landlord stays lenient, it is still the landlord who has the decisive power — they decide the terms and how lenient they want to be.

1. What terms does the landlord set?

The landlords in the studied buildings all told their tenants with informal agreements if they could not pay rental increases, they would have to leave the building. With the ultimatum comes the implicit threat of forceful eviction if the tenant refuses to voluntarily vacate the apartment. Three of the landlords also set parameters of tenant behavior, which also carried the threat of eviction if broken.

a. Pay or Leave

"Pay or leave" is not a term that relates to paying the original price agreed upon by both parties at the inception of the rental. Instead, the ultimatum is made on sometimes a per month basis, as was the case with Building B, where the landlord singlehandedly

decides a new rental price and if tenants don't pay, they are forced to leave. Tenant 2 in Building D was taken by surprise when the landlord broke the agreement they had reached, raising the monthly rent by more than 400 percent.

> "We had an agreement, paper, and we paid for this last 2 months at 850k …This month either we leave, or we pay $200 fresh."
> - Tenant 2, Building D, personal communication, September 30, 2022

Every landlord and representative in the studied buildings verbally agreed to a rental price with their tenants beforehand, which the tenants thought would be the price for the term of the agreement, until the price could be negotiated again. However, since the worst effects of Lebanon's economic collapse have taken hold – starting in about 2021 – the landlords and representatives adopted a strategy of raising rents monthly by small amounts, or unexpectedly by drastic amounts – no negotiating usually takes place. The landlords of Building A, C, and D also started refusing payment in LL, instead asking for cash USD, which is extremely difficult for most of the tenants who receive their salaries in LL.

Some landlords were more lenient with the payment deadline, like the representative of Building E, and tenant obstructionism worked as a deadline-lengthening tactic in Building A, but eventually the landlord was paid on their terms. The "pay or leave" ultimatum is beneficial for the landlord because finding affordable housing in Beirut is so difficult, and most of the tenants have children to worry about and don't have relatives in the country. As Tenant 3 in Building D said, "We don't have another place to go to if we are evicted. My husband spent 8 months finding this house (Tenant 3, Building D, personal communication, September 30, 2022)."

The threat of homelessness, as I will expand upon in the section of the tactics of the landlord, is a key negative incentive for tenants not to fight rental increases.

> **[When the landlord raises the rent, can you negotiate at all?] "**No, he tells you what it is and you either pay or leave. Next month if I don't pay 1,500,000 LL, I will have to leave."
> - Tenant 2, Building B, personal communication, September 29, 2022

b. Behavioral Controls

Whether it is because the market has so many prospective tenants or other more personal reasons, landlords also control the behavior of the tenants. This can be another tactic to extract more rent, but is also deployed if a tenant challenges the landlord's power or bottom line, as was the case with Tenant W, of Building A. As described earlier, he tried to organize the building's tenants to form a stronger negotiating position vis-à-vis the landlord. This was not forbidden in their verbal agreement, but the landlord still wanted Tenant W to vacate the apartment when he learned of Tenant W's efforts.

If landlords were transparent at the time of the rental agreement about their behavioral controls, tenants might not agree to be scrutinized and policed. However, the landlords often impose these controls after the tenant has already begun to live in the apartment. The representative of Building B said that he uses video cameras and unannounced visits to monitor the behavior of the tenants in the building. If the tenants are drinking "too much," according to the representative, that means they have excessive money and should be paying more in rent. The representative also does not allow tenants have guests in their apartments for longer than a day.

> "…if people have guests for 24 hours, it's fine. But longer I will use violence (to kick them out or talk to them). There is an example of a Sudanese guy. I went and figured out his friend is visiting with his girlfriend, and I dealt with them."
> - Representative, Building B, personal communication, September 29, 2022

Whether the reason for this aggression is that the representative wants to dissuade tenants from bringing guests that might turn into roommates, or simply exercise his power, was unclear. The result, whatever the reason, further cements the power of the representative and inculcates fear of challenging that power in the tenants. The landlords of Building D had a similar behavioral control placed on tenants that limited the number of people allowed in one apartment. Tenant 2 in Building D said that the fact that 3 families were living in the same apartment contributed to one of the owners choosing to raise the rent.

2. Tactics of the Landlord

In this section I will explain the tactics that landlords and representatives employ to exercise their power over tenants and force compliance with their terms. Landlords use a variety of tactics including that broadly include intimidation of several varieties and evictions. This section will also highlight the important caveat that not all of the landlords of the studied buildings were always ruthless and threatening in their treatment of tenants. However, as I will elaborate, the fact that the landlord has the sole power to dictate the terms of tenancy means that relying on the good graces of a select few landlords is detrimental to tenants' wellbeing in the city overall, and further underlines the perniciousness of these power structures.

a. Intimidation

The "pay or leave" ultimatum is intimidating in itself to tenants especially given the tight market and extremely precarious circumstances some of the tenants were in. So, most tenants who were able to find a way to pay, paid the rental increases. If tenants were obstinate, landlords threatened eviction. This threat is often enough to convince tenants to either pay or leave, especially if the tenant doesn't have residency papers or know the law.

> "At the beginning of 2022, the owner called me and said he wanted more money. He asked "can you pay? If not, you have to leave." I said no problem because my kids go to school here, where else can I go?"
> - Tenant 2, Building E, personal communication, September 13, 2022)

Knowing the law and their rights is not a guarantee that the landlord will not illegally evict the tenant or use other illegal intimidation tactics. My roommate and I saw this firsthand with the landlord of Building A. Starting in January of 2022, when we had lived in the apartment for about six months, the landlord demanded that we pay $400 in rent, an increase of more than 300 percent at the time. We tried to negotiate with him for a more equitable solution, where we would pay a slight increase, but still in LL and not USD. The landlord refused and told us to leave or pay $400. We then insisted on paying the agreed upon amount, and the landlord began intimidating us in an effort to try to get us to leave.

The landlord's first move was trying to use my roommate's signature on a receipt – on which the landlord had written that we would vacate the apartment — as a way of intimidating us to leave. We considered leaving after because we were unaware of our

rights and if this signature could be considered grounds for eviction but decided to consult with a lawyer affiliated with the Housing Monitor first. After being informed that this signature by only one party carried no legal weight, we refused to leave. The landlord's second tactic was refusing to accept our rent, which if we did not pay would be grounds for eviction. We were informed by the lawyer to pay at a public notary so we would have documentation of our payment. Next, the landlord stated on a signed document at the public notary that he would not be accepting our rental payment as we had not paid for the previous month's rent. This was an outright lie, as we had a receipt from the landlord of our payment, and we informed him of this fact.

It was at this point that the landlord stopped his intimidation tactics and tried to again negotiate with us, asking for $300 instead of $400. Not only was this rent infeasible for my roommate and I, but the landlord's intimidations and deceptions gave us little reason to trust that this agreement would be honored. When we refused, the landlord went back to legal trickery and tried to tell me to keep the money, "as you are students and I do not need it (if we had done this, the landlord would have legal grounds to evict us for nonpayment)." After this encounter, we continued to pay our rent at the public notary, and whenever I would see the landlord, he would yell and tell me to leave the apartment.

After some months, in October of 2022, the landlord had a notice delivered, saying that as foreigners we do not have the protection of Lebanese Law, and furnished apartments fall under a different contractual law – both claims are untrue, according to multiple lawyers I spoke with affiliated with the Housing Monitor. The notice ordered us to vacate the apartment, with a penalty of $50 for each additional day we remained after delivery. A lawyer affiliated with the Housing Monitor, drafted a letter challenging this notice, and

reaffirming my roommate and my legal right to remain in the apartment for the full term allowable by law (3 years). My roommate and I sent the letter to the landlord by mail.

We did not hear from the landlord again for a few months until I ran into him in the building. He asked me if I would like to pay for the water and electricity, to which I replied that I would, but he did not give me the bills or take money. Because payment of water and electricity is funneled through the landlord in Beirut, his refusal to let us pay for both jeopardized our access to those utilities – another intimidation tactic that the landlord would further escalate a few weeks later.

When, in early December of 2022, our apartment did not receive water for a concerning period of time, my roommate and I began to suspect that the landlord had done something to our water tank, which is housed on the roof of the building. Upon inspection of the tank, we observed that someone (either the landlord or his employee, as they are the only ones with access) had removed the pipe carrying water to our apartment. I called and confronted the landlord with this information, and, at first, he pretended not to know anything about the situation. Then after I told him that we saw what he did to the tank, he called me a fraud and a thief. The situation remains ongoing.

Intimidation tactics like those of my landlord were echoed in Building D. But the landlord couple said it was not they who would cut off the water to apartments late on rent, rather, the husband's late brother used the tactic on tenants.

> "His brother, who died, wasn't the same, he wasn't nice to the tenants. He used to cut off the water from an old woman's apartment if she didn't pay because he didn't want to pay for her. In that case, I would bring her water. It was shameful." – Landlords, Building D, personal communication, November 3, 2022)

Cutting off utilities is illegal under Lebanese law, but, as I will further explain in the section on the reasons for the power imbalance between landlord and tenant, the state is in no position to intervene, even if the tenants knew their rights and tried to involve the authorities.

b. Financially motivated evictions

Forced evictions for financial reasons – whether non-payment of rent or the prospect of a more lucrative tenant — were common among the landlords of the selected buildings. I have separated evictions for financial reasons from arbitrary evictions for other reasons for clarity's sake and to further highlight the power imbalance between landlord and tenant where evictions loom over tenants' heads and are a tool of financial gain and arbitrary exercises of power. I will further elaborate on arbitrary evictions in the following section.

Lebanese case law stipulated that landlords must file for a notice of eviction through the court system.[8] If their request is not approved, it is illegal for them to evict a tenant through force. In practice, however, the landlords and representatives of Buildings A, B, and C all had evicted at least one person through illegal means. The landlord of Building A chained the doors of multiple tenants, who were then forced to collect their belongings and vacate the apartments. As, I previously explained, one of the tenants was evicted with no notice because the landlord decided he wanted dollars, which was infeasible for the tenant to pay. The tenant was a migrant worker and had not kept receipts from his rental

[8] Civil Judge of Beirut's decision no. 501, issued on November 11, 2002.

payments, meaning that he could not prove the parties had an oral agreement at a certain amount. The landlord, who is a lawyer, almost certainly knew the position of the tenant and his inability to challenge him.

Similarly, in Building C, Tenant 2 when asked if the landlord had ever evicted anyone said, "Yes, last month someone didn't pay, and he threw their things outside (Tenant 2, Building C, personal communication, September 30, 2022)." Tenant 1 in the same building confirmed that the man was Syrian and couldn't make rental payments.

c. Arbitrary evictions

Although there is no difference between the illegality of arbitrary and financially motivated evictions (that aren't approved by a court), evidence of arbitrary evictions in even the small sample size of the buildings studied for this thesis shows the power landlords wield in 2022 Beirut. Financially motivated evictions usually can be shielded through trickery – as the landlord of Building A engaged in — involving claims that tenants failed to make rental payments or were illegally occupying an apartment (lack of contract or receipts of payment gives tenants little recourse against these claims).

Arbitrary evictions, on the other hand would be more difficult to defend if the tenant chose to file a complaint with a court, and, as I will expand upon in the next section, if the Lebanese Justice System was functional and impartial. But given the state of the Lebanese Justice System in 2022 and the fact that most tenants are unaware of their legal rights, landlords and building representatives like the representative of Building B, face little consequence for arbitrarily evicting tenants.

> "I'm the representative of this building and this building [gestures] because I'm the boss and I know how to deal with all kinds of people. And if someone does something wrong, I'll take them from their ears and kick them out."
> – Representative, Building B, personal communication, September 29, 2022

The representative had no qualms about boasting to me and my fellow researchers about the fact that he evicts people based on his own feelings if they should do something that he does not like.

d. The Caprices of Landlords

Not all the landlords operated based on ruthless financial calculations, some indeed behaved sympathetically toward their tenants. But this tenuous relationship based upon the sympathies of the landlords offers little real protection to tenants. Indeed, the representative in Building E and the live-in landlords of Building D were well liked by the tenants I interviewed. Tenant 2 of Building E, when asked if it was a problem if he paid the rent late said, "No, she [the building representative] doesn't have a problem with it. She's nice (Tenant 2, Building E, personal communication, September 13, 2022)."

The representative of Building E said that she had argued with one of the owners of the building, when that owner wanted to evict tenants for nonpayment.

> "When I talk to the landlord, and I tell him they haven't paid for two months he tells me to kick them out. 'Don't let them in the apartment.' 'Why are you letting them stay?' I tell him, 'You live in Canada. In Lebanon we have a different situation. There are people that are poor, they have families, they have children.' But he keeps saying, 'kick them out.' But I say, 'let's wait.'"
> - Representative, Building E, personal communication, July 18, 2022

Alternatively, for the tenants of Building D, when one of the owners came back from the United States and began a battle with the landlords, one of which is her brother, over raising the rent, the wishes of the recently returned owner won out.

> "… the landlord who lived here was nice… the owner's sister came from America, and she didn't accept this rent and raised it. This month either we leave, or we pay $200 fresh." - Tenant 2, Building D, personal communication, September 30, 2022

Thus, tenants are left in an uncertain and fragile position where they rely on the graces of landlords, which may change, or another owner may overrule.

B. The Reasons for the power imbalance

The first reason that landlords wield so much power in Lebanon is that the legal system and enforcement bodies grant landowners and landlords almost total control of their property, with the police and municipalities allowing property owners to violate the law openly. The second is that the economic crisis has disrupted or disintegrated parts of the legal system.

1. The only meaningfully enforced law is property

Before the economic and political crisis, the Lebanese legal system heavily favored property owners over tenants in matters of dispute, especially if the tenants were foreigners. With the legal system inoperable, the ability for landlords to exercise their power over their property is almost unchecked. Importantly, there is a large grey area in these disputes depending on the landlord and the tenant. Taking my experience in Building A as an

example, the landlord had no qualms in illegally evicting tenants who had no legal basis for challenging him (and did not show him that they knew their rights). While in my roommate and my experience, once the landlord was aware that we spoke with a lawyer and knew our rights, his behavior changed. The landlord continued to intimidate us and illegally cut our water supply, but he did not attempt an illegal eviction.

So, despite the legal system's shutdown, legal threats had some effect in checking certain landlord's behavior. However, it is unclear whether the police would do anything should the landlord evict us by force. It has been observed by the Housing Monitor that police forces sometimes assist landlords in illegal evictions (Housing Monitor, 2021).

Structural problems in Beirut's administration that allow landlords to exploit the precarious conditions of their tenants have existed since the end of the Lebanese Civil War. The Municipality of Beirut and the government structures of each area of the city have not sufficiently enforce laws requiring landlords make formal contracts with tenants, uphold tenant's rights to privacy and transparent rental increases that are agreed upon by both parties. The municipality also does not tax vacant buildings or units, incentivizing owners to refuse contracts with tenants and report their units as empty (Fawaz and Zaatari, 2020). Additionally, although landlords are legally required to perform repairs and upgrades to their buildings, this is rarely enforced, which is why the buildings studied exist in their present degraded condition.

2. Absence of the State

The severe devaluation of the LL and withdrawal of meager government services even further from public life starting in 2019 has exacerbated the trend of landlords openly violating the law without consequence. As previously mentioned, Lebanese judges have been on strike since August of 2022, clogging the already ineffectual court system with cases that will be lucky to ever be reviewed. The wages of the city's police force and Lebanese General Security Forces have been reduced more than 90 percent, forcing the offices to make cutbacks, and severely undercutting their ability to function.

What this means for landlords and tenants is that their disputes generally exist outside of the legal system. Despite the threat of legal action still carrying some deterrent ability, on the ground intimidation and obstinance, or turn out to be the main deciding factors in disputes and negotiations. The landlord of Building C can throw the belongings of the tenant out on the street and lock the door of the apartment, illegally, and there's not much the tenant can do about it. Property is power in the Lebanon of 2022 and force is the language of the powerful. So, while my landlord in Building A may be unwilling to throw our belongings on the street and change our locks, another would.

3. Symbolic power of the landlord

a. <u>The status-quo of property ownership in Lebanon</u>

Lebanon does not have a state issued pension or retirement plan for its citizens. As such, many of those who can afford to, invest in buying apartments as a store of savings that they can live off when they are older. These landlords often are more sympathetic

characters to their tenants than faceless real estate companies or owners of multiple buildings. Tenants like Tenant W and S in Building A even expressed some sympathy for the landlord, who, before the crisis, was charging $1000 for each apartment.

> "I mean I also get that he was making more out of this building and now he's making a quarter of what was the price." - Tenant W, Building A, personal communication, September 19, 2022

So, even in situations where tenants are struggling to afford rent, while landlords earn many times their salaries each month, some tenants feel sympathy for the loss of some of the landlord's profits in the crisis. This sympathy was not shared by most of the tenants I spoke with, however, but it is another, subtler, form of power that landlords hold in a country where property ownership is the goal of everyone.[9] Their profits from owning the building are so ingrained and normalized (as they are in most capitalist countries) that some tenants see unilateral rental increases as the landlord's right. Tenant 1 in Building E expressed as much.

> [What would you do if the landlord tried to evict you?] "…if he still wanted me out, well who am I, if he thinks he can get a better deal let him try."
>
> -Tenant 1, Building E, personal communication, June 21, 2022

[9] Not only as a retirement plan of sorts, but to escape the rental market and have an inheritable asset.

CONCLUSION

The five buildings studied in Geitawi exhibit tenants living in poor conditions, paying exploitative rents, forgoing the basic necessities of living to afford rent, with little ways to maneuver and change their circumstances. Some tenants can be in a better position than others – Lebanese citizens or those with residency, as well as long-term tenants, may be able to negotiate for better conditions than Syrian refugees and migrant workers without residency.

The cause of the precarious situation of these tenants is primarily due to an unregulated and tight housing market, the criminalization of many of the tenants. This gives landlords the power to unilaterally decide the outcome of negotiations, even if they can be lenient or favorable for the tenants in some cases.

A. The State of Lebanon is exacerbating the problem of precarious individuals finding housing

How do the research findings of this thesis inform the urban literature? First, the findings confirm that cities, as they function and are organized today, indeed exacerbate precarity as observed by Ida Susser and Stéphane Tonnelat (Susser and Tannelat, 2013). Beirut and Lebanon, more generally, has a legal system and state that simultaneously works in the favor of landlords by not enforcing the duties they have to tenants or regulating the market, and punishes and criminalizes refugees and migrant workers' presence. This situation, where the law exists and is enforced against precarious populations but isn't

enforced against landlords, has created the conditions where landlords have all of the power and precarious tenants have almost none.

This confirms the findings of Raquel Rolnik, who argues that neoliberalism and capital consolidation has transformed cities into places not to live in, but to store and extract wealth from (Rolnik, 2013). The class of property owners in cities, which I have shown in Geitawi are either wealthy investors or inheritors, are the only ones that have a "right to the city", in the sense David Harvey uses it (Harvey, 1992). Desiree Fields terms this class the "asset class" and showed how after the 2008 financial crisis in the United States, this class grew exponentially (Fields, 2018). The landlords in Beirut differ from this American class, which is increasingly corporate and bureaucratized, but the same tendency exists in Beirut landowners to extract capital from the properties they own in similar ways (increasing profits, lower investments) as in other more "advanced" capitalist nations. Conversely, the tenants in Geitawi (and in many other cities around the world) are temporarily renting access to shelter in increasingly tenuous and poor conditions, with little ability to become secure in their shelter and make a home in the city (Muñoz, 2018).

Second, the experiences of the tenants I interviewed in Geitawi add to the emerging literature dissecting power relationships between landlord and tenant, by scholars such as Michael Byrne, Rachel McArdle, and Ashley Gunter. Like Lebanon before the crisis, Ireland's regulatory mechanisms puts the onus on tenants to police landlord power by filing complaints. Tenant fears of retaliation and being unable to secure new housing, makes this process particularly ineffective, according to Michael Byrne, Rachel McArdle, and other

scholars that have investigated the Irish rental market (Byrne and McArdle, 2022).[10] This thesis shows that the pairs' findings are not localized to Irish markets (as does Ashley Gunter's), and adds a further dimension wherein these tenants' precarity in Geitawi in addition includes more generally poor conditions and uncertainty of being able to stay in place.

B. Informal regulation of housing markets can lead to poor outcomes

These findings bolster the arguments of scholars (Fawaz 2017, Roy 2009) who argued that while informal regulation may have been celebrated sometimes as affirmations of political rights (Holston, 2009), they do not guarantee more equitable outcomes. In this case study, the regulation of the housing markets through unspoken rules and daily negotiations was clearly used to bolster existing power structures and harm city-dwellers. Importantly, this thesis points to the fact that Beirut's entrenched social and legalized power structures that informally regulate housing, are still largely effective with or without a strong state. The few legal protections for tenants (such as contracts or court complaints) have become increasingly worthless since the crisis began.

Conversely, the thesis highlighted that despite dire conditions tenants could still turn to support from friends, neighbors, and family members. This echoes the literature in urban Africa for the past decades, where scholars have shown that networks of social solidarity

[10] Ireland also has many landlords who own one or a few properties and interact with their tenants more than corporations or holding groups would.

were the last and often only line of protection in informally regulated markets against powerful actors like landlords (Simone, 2004; Gunter, 2014).

Without functional legal bodies that could check landlord's power and regulate the housing sector, requiring drastic governmental changes that may be years (or decades) away, Beirut's precarious tenants have few options for resistance. Both Abdoumaliq Simone's work in Johannesburg and Solange Muñoz's insights from Buenos Aires are relevant to these tenants in Geitawi. The fact that so many of the tenants are precarious in their housing makes resistance to the power structures so difficult, as Muñoz observes, because their basic necessities of living can be used as tools of intimidation by landlords (Muñoz, 2018). However, if any tactic were to work in the Geitawi tenants' favor, I suggest, it would be cooperation and solidarity among themselves like Abdoumaliq Simone describes (Simone, 2004). Obviously, this is easier prescribed than implemented because of the entrenched power of Beirut's landlord and owning class, and the precarity of the tenants. But networking between tenants, forming community groups that could one day form tenant unions is a viable, if difficult, strategy to address the power asymmetry between these landlords and tenants.

APPENDIX I

The questions I asked the landlords, broadly, are as follows:

- Where do you live?
- How long have you been the landlord of this building?
- How did you come to be the landlord?
- Do you share the ownership with other people?
- Do you own any other buildings?
- What is your profession? Has it always been? Is "building management" the only thing you do?
- Can you tell me about all the "responsibilities" you have as a landlord? What does the job entail?
- It must be a big risk for you as a landlord in the middle of this financial crisis to rent out knowing that some of the tenants will never pay. How do you protect yourself? Are you still able to make a decent income? Has your income gone down substantially? [is it a good idea to do a contract or not?]
- Can you describe how you find people to rent? Has the profile of your tenants changed over time? Are there more "reliable" or "desirable" tenants than others? Do you have to charge more 'undesirable' tenants so that you protect yourself from losses?
- How has the economic crisis impacted how you manage the building(s)?
- Have any NGO's helped you repair your building? Has the Municipality come to you to help you?
- Have you changed the rents for each apartment during the last three years? How frequently? How do you decide on the rent? Do you ask other landlords/ check what other landlords are doing around you?
- Have you had to make people leave? What were the reasons?

APPENDIX II

The questions I asked the tenants, also broadly, are as follows:

- Can you describe your living situation?
- What is your nationality?
- Can you tell me about your family history?
- How did you come to live in this area?
- How has the neighborhood changed since you have lived in it?
- Do you have access to adequate utilities?
- What is your relationship like with your neighbors?
- Do you know neighbors who have been evicted? If, so, can you tell me more?
- Do you feel threatened by your landlord or that you will lose your housing?
- What contract/agreement do you have with your landlord? [Do you feel this contract protects you? If you don't, would you like to have on? If they do, do you think that you can enforce it? Have you asked the landlord for one?][terms of the agreement: duration, costs, expectations if you are told to leave, receipt on payment]
- Can you tell me about your landlord and your relationship with him/her?
- Are you a part of any groups or networks that helps you access any kind of information? [does it protect you? if your landlord wanted to evict you?]
- Does the landlord treat you differently than others in the building?
- Where would you go if you were evicted?
- Who would you ask for assistance (if you were evicted)?
- Do you see eviction as a possibility?
- Would you like to move, or are you happy here?
- If so, where would you like to go?

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