

# The effective role of urban planning that lays the foundation for conflicts. Case study of the Lebanese civil war (Beirut)

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**Abstract.** Between the years of 1975 and 1990, one of the most multifaceted and complex civil wars had emerged in the Middle East history, known as the Lebanese civil war. The capital city of Lebanon "Beirut" witnessed a factual battleground of numerous armed factions to seize and control the city's strategic resources. As a result of this conflict, 120,000 individuals faced their death and over a million other civilians got displaced from their regions. This article aims to assess the role of urban planning in the Lebanese civil war and explore the possible relationship between the planning of cities' architecture and laying out the severity or resolution of civil wars. Using the Lebanese civil war as a case study, this article tries to add to the knowledge of how urban planning practices and policies might affect social conflicts by an in-depth investigation of historical records and scholarly literature.

**Key words:** urban conflicts, urban fabric, sectarianism in Lebanon, slums and conflict, violence in slums.

## 1. The propagation of Sectarianism in Lebanon and its relationship to Urban planning

Deep sectarian tensions were worsened by urban planning and architectural practices throughout the Lebanese Civil War. The divergency of different ethnicities and religious background of the Lebanese people have been reflected in the physical environment and the spatial distribution of communities, where zoning regulations, governmental neglect, and geographical aspects exacerbated the sectarian tensions in Lebanon.

The spatial zoning in urban planning was one of the primary elements that contributed to the spread of sectarianism in Lebanon<sup>1</sup>. Due to the aim of maintaining a delicate balance between the different sect groups, there was a lack of inclusiveness and integration between diverse communities. Thus, sectarian lines were brought to physically segregate the holistic Lebanese population which gave them a lesser chance of meet, integrate, and take decisions as a unified group like the case of most other nations. For instance, in Beirut, neighborhoods were often defined by sectarian lines dominated by one religious group forming a case similar to ghettos. These accumulated acts of separation both physically and socially have led in turn to a legitimate case of "group isolation" which has been the fuel of a potential civil war.

Furthermore, the stratification and unequal distribution of wealth were pioneered by urban planning practices of favoring the private housing and infrastructure over public investment sectors. That has led to the emergence of gated enclaves for the wealthy sectarian groups,

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<sup>1</sup> Haddad 2013

hence, to the detachment from the wider society<sup>2</sup>. This physical isolation, together with other factors like financial disparity and political patronage, contributed to the polarization and fragmentation of society along sectarian lines<sup>3</sup>.

Additionally, one of the key aspects that play a huge role in unification of nations is sharing communal culture. In that sense, urban planning methods in Lebanon had neglected the preservation of the Lebanese cultural heritage and sharing identities that could give a sense of patriotism to the Lebanese people. The civil war's destruction of historic neighborhoods and landmarks, followed by post-war reconstruction efforts that prioritized economic interests over cultural heritage, resulted in the loss of shared spaces and symbols that could have fostered social cohesion and promoted cross-sectarian interactions<sup>4</sup>. These levels of destruction and intended neglecting from the authorities have furtherly fueled the tensions and isolation of the Lebanese people<sup>5</sup>.

Also, top-down decision-making processes have frequently characterized urban planning practices in Lebanon, with limited opportunities for meaningful participation and engagement of local communities, including diverse sectarian groups. This exclusionary approach to urban development has marginalized particular sectarian populations, aggravated their sense of alienation and unhappiness and contributed to social problems<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the absence of inclusive and participatory decision-making processes has frequently resulted in the imposition of planning regulations and policies that do not adequately reflect the diverse needs, aspirations, and identities of various sectarian groups, resulting in social tensions and conflicts<sup>7</sup>.

Overall, there is a complicated and diverse link between urban planning practices and the spread of sectarianism in Lebanon. The spatial segregation of urban areas along sectarian lines, unequal distribution of resources and services among different sects, neglect of cultural heritage, and exclusionary decision-making processes have all contributed to the escalation of sectarian tensions and social fragmentation in Lebanon. These urban design practices have exacerbated sectarianism, strengthened social divisions, and exacerbated social conflicts, especially the spread of sectarianism in Lebanon. The interaction of urban planning practices and sectarian dynamics in Lebanon has played a key role in establishing the country's social, cultural, and political landscape.

## 2. The Impact of Urban Fabric Destruction on Social Cohesion

During the Lebanese Civil War, the loss of urban fabric and infrastructure had a significant influence on social cohesion, community resilience, and the potential for post-war rehabilitation<sup>8</sup>. During the war, the urban fabric of cities and towns throughout Lebanon was

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<sup>2</sup> Salem 2018

<sup>3</sup> Harb 2016

<sup>4</sup> Diab 2017

<sup>5</sup> Al-Haddad 2015

<sup>6</sup> Nehme 2013

<sup>7</sup> El-Khoury 2011

<sup>8</sup> Davis 2006

severely damaged, with buildings, roads, and public spaces destroyed or severely damaged by shelling, bombing, and other forms of violence<sup>9</sup>. The loss of urban infrastructure, along with large-scale relocation, aided in the dispersion of social networks and the dissolution of communal bonds<sup>10</sup>. This subheading will investigate the influence of urban devastation on social cohesion and community resilience in Lebanon, focusing on the experiences and efforts of various communities to reconstruct.

The damage of Lebanon's urban fabric and infrastructure has hampered post-war restoration and recovery attempts. Physical devastation of buildings, roads, and other infrastructure has made it difficult for communities to re-establish their social and economic networks, hampered efforts to reconstruct, and hampered efforts to recover. The loss of urban infrastructure has also had a significant influence in war-affected areas. The dispersion of social networks and the dissolution of community bonds have posed substantial barriers to recovery and have contributed to the country's ongoing social and economic issues in many places.

In addition to physically destroying urban infrastructure, the Lebanese Civil War had a significant impact on the social fabric of communities around the nation. The war resulted in massive population displacement, with many people having to evacuate their homes and towns owing to the conflict's brutality and instability<sup>11</sup>. This displacement had a significant influence on social networks and community interactions, contributing to community fragmentation and social cohesiveness collapse. Many of those impacted by the conflict had a sense of dislocation and puzzlement as a result of the destruction of their homes, neighborhoods, and public places, hurting community resilience and recovery efforts.

Despite these obstacles, many Lebanese communities worked to rebuild and recover in the post-war period. Communal-based initiatives have evolved in certain circumstances to help restoration operations while also fostering social cohesiveness and communal resilience. Local communities, for example, have organized to clean up and repair public places in certain locations, while community groups have worked to give support and assistance to individuals impacted by the conflict in others. These activities have been crucial in strengthening social cohesion and community resilience, as well as in assisting with recovery and reconstruction efforts throughout Lebanon.

### 3. Slums and conflict in Beirut city

Since the early twentieth century, informal settlements have been a feature of Beirut's urban landscape. The city's fast population increase, spurred by rural-urban migration and refugee influxes from neighboring countries, resulted in a housing crisis and the rise of informal settlements<sup>12</sup>. The number of informal settlements in Beirut expanded dramatically

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<sup>9</sup> Khouri 2006

<sup>10</sup> Nasr 2010

<sup>11</sup> Haidar 2019

<sup>12</sup> Salem 2018

during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), as displaced persons sought sanctuary in the city's abandoned buildings and vacant lots<sup>13</sup>.

### *3.1. Political economy of slums*

The growth of informal settlements in Beirut is not simply a result of a housing crisis, but it is also tied to the city's political economy. The government has evicted and demolished informal communities, while political elites have utilized them to acquire political support and influence<sup>14</sup>. As a result, people of informal settlements are stuck between the government's efforts to eradicate them and politicians' efforts to defend them.

Furthermore, in informal settlements, the lack of formal land tenure and property rights has contributed to a situation in which land is used for short-term gain and speculation rather than long-term development. This has resulted in an informal economy of land and housing that is largely uncontrollable by the state, contributing to a cycle of poverty and social exclusion<sup>15</sup>.

### *3.2. Conflict and violence in slums*

In Beirut, informal settlements are frequently related to violence and conflict, including as intercommunal violence and organized crime<sup>16</sup>. These communities are subject to violence and instability because of a lack of institutional control and basic utilities such as sanitation and lighting<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, because these settlements are informal, it is difficult for authorities to regulate them and provide basic services and infrastructure<sup>18</sup>.

### *3.3. Urban planning's role*

The role of urban planning in resolving the issue of informal settlements in Beirut is essential. The first step is to recognize the need for cheap and suitable housing for all citizens, regardless of income or legal status. This necessitates a shift in emphasis away from short-term political gain and towards long-term planning and development that prioritizes the needs of the city's citizens.

Regularization of informal settlements is one strategy that has been recommended, which entails granting people property rights and legal recognition, as well as providing basic services and infrastructure. This method has proven to be effective in other countries, such as Brazil and Colombia, where it has resulted in lower poverty and social exclusion. This method, however, must be applied in a way that is attentive to Beirut's distinct setting and citizens' needs.

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen 2013

<sup>14</sup> Diab and Harb 2013

<sup>15</sup> Saliba and Slieman 2015

<sup>16</sup> Harb 2013

<sup>17</sup> Karam 2018

<sup>18</sup> UN-Habitat 2003

The neighborhood of Hayy al-Sellom is a famous example of the influence of informal settlements on violence in Beirut. Hayy al-Sellom, located on the city's southern borders, is a largely Shiite neighborhood that arose as an informal town in the 1980s, during the early phases of the civil war. The area is distinguished by tiny lanes, closely packed dwellings, and a lack of essential utilities like drainage and electricity<sup>19</sup>.

During the civil war, Amal, a Shiite organization that developed in the late 1970s in response to the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, held Hayy al-Sellom. To secure the support of the local populace, Amal utilized the neighborhood as a base of operations and established a network of social services, including schools, clinics, and welfare programs<sup>20</sup>. However, the presence of the militia in the neighborhood resulted in violence and conflict with other militias, such as the Lebanese Forces and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), who sought to expand their control over the area<sup>21</sup>.

Due to political, social, and economic constraints, the state's attempts to govern informal settlements and provide basic services to their people were restricted after the civil war. Informal settlements have continued to spread, and the government has depended heavily on informal agreements with local players like militias and political parties to regulate them.

As a result, informal settlements are frequently controlled by non-state entities who are not accountable to the state or the citizens of these regions. These players frequently employ violence and coercion to preserve dominance, and confrontations between competing groups can swiftly develop and result in large-scale violence.

Furthermore, informal settlements are frequently located in areas prone to environmental hazards such as landslides and floods. These risks might disproportionately affect residents of informal settlements, who frequently lack access to essential infrastructure and services. As residents compete for resources and assistance, this can exacerbate tensions and conflicts in these areas.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Lebanese Civil War provides important insights on the link between urban design, architecture, and social strife. The spread of sectarianism via confessional zoning, the devastation of the urban fabric, and the absence of comprehensive planning and regulations throughout the postwar rebuilding period all contributed to social tensions and worsened the conflict. However, there have been efforts in the aftermath of the war to use urban planning as a tool for reconciliation and peacebuilding, using approaches such as inclusive reconstruction, participatory planning, and promoting spatial justice.

More research is needed to better understand the relationship between urban planning and social conflict, particularly in contexts other than Lebanon. Case studies from different

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<sup>19</sup> Ghandour 2012

<sup>20</sup> Karam 2010

<sup>21</sup> Fawaz, 2010



nations and areas in the midst of or recovering from civil wars might provide light on the role of urban design in influencing social conflicts and peace-building initiatives. Furthermore, examining the outcomes and impacts of specific urban planning interventions in conflict-affected areas could provide policymakers and practitioners with practical lessons on how to use urban planning as a tool for conflict prevention, mitigation, and post-conflict reconstruction.

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