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# LEBANON UNSETTLED

## THE SPATIALITIES OF THE OCTOBER 2019 UPRISING

Deen Shariff Sharp



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## About the Author

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## Abstract

The October 2019 uprising was unprecedented in its geographic scale, its three-month duration, and for the numbers of demonstrators that participated in this revolt. One of the most remarked upon aspects of the October 2019 protest by scholars and analysts is the revolts geographical spread and depth. The significance of the October 2019 revolt has frequently been framed by its ‘decentralised’ geographic pattern. But I contend this does not accurately analytically comprehend the socio-spatial dynamics of the eruption of protests in this moment. The central public squares of Beirut, namely Martyrs’ Square and Nejme Square, were, as is traditional, the centre of gravity for the protests. The eruption of large-scale simultaneous protest beyond the metropolitan core of Beirut – including along the Daoura highway (in Jel el-Dib and Zouq), Tripoli, Saida, Nabatieh, Bekaa, Baalbeck and Zahle – was however, unique. In this paper, I argue that rather than ‘decentralised’, October 2019 should be understood as characterised by a *hierarchical diffusion*. This hierarchical diffusion was underpinned by, and an outcome of, processes of urbanisation that have accelerated over the past thirty years. This paper situates the October 2019 revolt within these broader processes to understand the patterns of protests that exploded on to the streets in this period.

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## Introduction

On 17 October 2019, Lebanon was convulsed by the beginning of a three-month long revolt. A country so often referred to as ‘fragmented’ suddenly illustrated a remarkable ability to unite. This protest was notable for its duration, the novel political unity and coalitions that emerged, the sheer number of protesters and its geographical scale. Many refer to this moment as a *thawra*, or ‘revolution’, a term that was frequently deployed in the uprising itself and remains graffitied on the streets and alleys of the country. While the 2019 protests did not result in the downfall of the ‘regime’, or achieve the type of change the populace of Lebanon demanded, it did present a transformative moment in which new sorts of identities, political frames and possibilities were activated.<sup>1</sup> October 2019 shook the complex matrix of established political and economic power holders, but did not topple it. Although October 2019 failed to achieve a revolution or substantive nation-wide transformation, it remains significant in Lebanon’s political, social and cultural history.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most remarked upon aspects of the October 2019 protest by scholars and analysts is the revolt’s geographical extent. Before October 2019, protest in contemporary Lebanon had been city-based – and more precisely Beirut-based and centric – events. Nejme Square and Martyrs’ Square in downtown Beirut near the seats of government power have long been the loci of revolt in the country.<sup>3</sup> October 2019 is unique in Lebanon’s history of contentious politics because protests were not just confined to downtown Beirut. In the north, protests erupted in Halba (Akkar) and Zgharta, Batroun and Lebanon’s second largest city Tripoli, earning it the moniker of ‘Bride of the Revolution’ (*‘Arus al-Thawrah*). Smaller scale protests erupted in the towns of Mount Lebanon – in the south, Saida and Nabatieh, and in the Bekaa, Baalbeck and Zahle. In addition to these towns and cities erupting in unprecedented, synchronised protests with the capital, novel spaces of protest emerged. Notably, the Daoura highway (officially known as Highway 51) became a significant site of large-scale protests, at the Jel el-Dib and Zouq intersections.

To understand the spatiality of the contentious politics of October 2019, academics, political analysts, activists, journalists and participants have frequently used the term ‘decentralisation.’<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Karam and Rima Majed, for instance, argue in their edited volume *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019* that it was ‘the first time in the modern history of Lebanon that protests erupted concomitantly across the country in a geographically decentralized way, mobilizing such vast numbers of protesters.’<sup>5</sup> This is a sentiment that has been echoed across different forums and continues to be the dominant way in which the spatialities of October 2019 are understood. Decentralisation refers both to the scale and location of the protests – the fact that so many different places across Lebanon featured large-scale revolts.

<sup>1</sup> Hani Adada, ‘The Cycle of Loss: Between Trial and Sabotage,’ in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019: Voices from the Revolution*, Jeffrey Karam and Rima Majed, eds (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> The continued significance of the October 2019 to contemporary Lebanese life can be seen in a series of videos produced as part of this research project: <https://lebanonunsettled.org/videos>

<sup>3</sup> For a full overview of the history of revolt in Lebanon see <https://lebanonunsettled.org/archive>

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Jeffrey Karam and Rima Majed, ‘Framing the October Uprising in Lebanon,’ in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 1–16.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1: Protest in Downtown Beirut. Photograph by Hasan Shaaban, 2019

In this paper I argue that the pattern of revolt in October 2019 is better understood as being marked by a *hierarchical diffusion* rather than decentralisation. The significance of protest spaces ‘beyond the square’<sup>6</sup> of the capital in October 2019 is a central concern of this paper. But at the same time, I emphasise that this does not mean that the revolt was decentralised. The October 2019 revolt is framed by a hierarchical diffusion, in which protest began in the core (downtown Beirut) and spread across the country. October 2019 was not flat in its geography of contentious politics. Different protest spaces took on divergent levels of social significance and meaning. The intricate hierarchy of protest places requires further research that is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice to say here there was a clear hierarchy.

Beirut’s central Martyrs’ Square and Nejme Square, adjacent to the parliament and the Prime Minister’s office (the Grand Serail), constituted the centre of gravity for the protests, as has long been the case (see Figure 1). However diffuse power in Lebanon may be, this was a revolt against the state and the political elite, still symbolically and materially represented by governing organs, whose centres are located in built form in downtown Beirut. Throughout the multiple protests of October 2019 there was a focal point for the revolt: downtown Beirut. As one participant in the protest told me, Beirut remained the ‘main event.’<sup>7</sup> But the novelty of October 2019 is that protests moved quickly to block roads and highways, encouraging people to protest near their residences. Another innovation was the fact that the Daoura highway itself became a notable space of protest. In this paper, I focus on how the neoliberal urban legacy of the post-war era shaped the patterns of hierarchical diffusion and in turn, the significance of the highway, as a protest space.

<sup>6</sup> See, Deen Sharp and Claire Panetta, eds, *Beyond the Square: Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Urban Research, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, recorded audio interview, July 2022, Lebanon.

Influenced by the work of Henri Lefebvre and Manuel Castells,<sup>8</sup> I contend that the outcomes of October 2019 may not have been a ‘revolution’ but were a product of, and reaction to, the urban revolution that has been underway since the end of the Civil War (1991) and the neoliberal urbanisation that it entailed. I argue that October 2019 is the first fully urbanised revolt in Lebanon’s history.<sup>9</sup> The processes of urbanisation in Lebanon have impacted the patterns of revolt and in turn socio-spatial relations in the country, as well as the type of political demands and claims made. The revolt, for instance, centred around urban questions, that notably were both city-based and related to the entire urban fabric, including public services, real estate, corruption, the provision of urban goods and services (such as electricity, water and transport), spatial forms (including highways, public space and buildings), access to – as well as delineations and definitions of – private and public space, and urban identity.<sup>10</sup> The post-war era established an urban structure. The urban crisis of recent years that culminated in the October 2019 uprising is an articulation of the challenge coming as much from the new urban spaces of the post-war era, as from new actors in history and society. October 2019 should be understood as an urban and urbanised revolt in which urban issues, concerns and spaces were paramount.

The significance of urban issues and the importance of urban space to the October 2019 revolt has been examined by several scholars.<sup>11</sup> While this literature has commented on the notable scale of the revolt, and its geographical spread across the nation, it has mainly concentrated its spatial analysis on the public squares of Beirut and Tripoli. Scholarship has placed an emphasis on the remarkable crowds that massed in public squares, particularly Martyrs’ and Nejme Square in Beirut and al-Nur square in Tripoli, and how protesters ‘reclaimed public space’. Notably, it has also detailed the intricate patchwork

<sup>8</sup> Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983); Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1970] 2003).

<sup>9</sup> For a full overview of the history of revolt in Lebanon see [www.lebanonunsettled.org](http://www.lebanonunsettled.org)

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of who mobilised and why in the protests see this illustrative paper that surveyed protesters in the first two weeks of the revolt, Lea Bou Khater and Rima Majed, ‘Lebanon’s 2019 October Revolution: Who mobilized and why?’, *The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, Working Papers*, [http://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/leb-oct-rev\\_-\\_v.1.3-digital.pdf](http://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/leb-oct-rev_-_v.1.3-digital.pdf) (accessed 25 May 2023).

<sup>11</sup> See for instance, Tamim Abdo, ‘Reconstructing the Uprising in Tripoli: The Revolution that Never Left the Square’, in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 286–91; Mona Fawaz and Isabela Serhan, ‘Urban Revolutions: Lebanon’s October 2019 Uprising’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Spotlight On Series (2020). Available at <https://www.ijurr.org/spotlight-on/urban-revolts/urban-revolutions-lebanons-october-2019-uprising/> (accessed 24 May 2023); Sara Fregonese, ‘Rage Against the Sectarian Machine’, *Urban Violence Research Network*, 29 October 2019. Available at <https://urbanviolence.org/rage-against-the-sectarian-machine/> (accessed 14 August 2023); Hiba Ghanem, ‘Spatial profanation of Lebanese sectarianism: al-Nur Square and the 17 October 2019 Protest’, *Journal for Cultural Research* 25 (2021); Mona Harb, ‘How Urban Space Shapes Collective Action: The Lebanese Uprising of 2019’, in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 109–19; Nizar Hassan, ‘The Power and Limits of Blocking Roads: How the October Uprising Disrupted Lebanon’, in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 174–87; Nikolas Kosmatopoulos, ‘Unhatching the Egg in Lebanon’s 2019 Protests: Activism, Purity and the Real-Estatization of Civil Society’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120 (2021); Rawane Nassif, ‘Roadblocking, Mass Strike and the Qantari Collective’, in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 263–69; Anne-Kirstine Rønn, ‘The Struggle of Unifying a People in Fragments’, PhD dissertation, Aarhus University, 2022; Wael Sinno, ‘How People Reclaimed Public Spaces in Beirut during the 2019 Lebanese Uprising’, *The Journal of Public Space* 5 (2020).



of divides within what otherwise looks like a unified mass in these public spaces, detailed below. This rich scholarship on the spatialities of the October 2019 has, however, a narrow spatial lens that I aim in this short paper to expand by directing attention to how this uprising did not simply *occur* in space, but was in part a *product* of urban space – namely the neoliberal urban transformation of the post-war era – and the novel way in which the highway was transformed into a site of revolt.

This study draws on qualitative data derived from over thirty interviews in English and Arabic with students, activists and academics who participated in the uprisings. These interviews took place in Beirut, Kaslik and Tripoli. I also visited the sites of protests on the highways, in Jel el-Dib and Zouq. This paper also relies on historical research produced as part of the ‘Lebanon Unsettled’ project, which has also been compiled into a website.<sup>12</sup> This research for this paper was conducted from September 2020 until July 2023.

## The October 2019 Uprisings

In the run up to October 2019, tensions had been building throughout the country. In August, Fitch Credit Rating Agency downgraded Lebanon to indicate a possible default on its sovereign debt, piling further pressure on the country’s economy that had become trapped in a downward spiral.<sup>13</sup> Between 1997 and 2019, US dollars and the Lebanese lira were used interchangeably in everyday transactions, but by September 2019 banks were restricting access to dollars and some traders refused to accept Lebanese lira.<sup>14</sup> Inflation took hold of the lira and the dollar exchange rate on the black market diverged sharply from the official rate. Hannes Baumann details that the ‘currency slide led to rising panic among Lebanese who were facing the prospect of high inflation and plummeting living standards when the majority were already at the precipice of poverty.’<sup>15</sup>

Alongside the economic crisis was an ecological one. There had been growing protests and disquiet around the World Bank-sponsored Bisri dam.<sup>16</sup> These groups would emerge as important to many of the revolts in the October uprisings. The ecological crisis further escalated on 13 October with the outbreak of forest fires in the Chouf, Khroub and areas south of Beirut. The Lebanese Civil Defence lacked sufficient and properly maintained equipment to fight the fires. The three firefighting Sikorsky S-80 helicopters were all out of service.<sup>17</sup> This meant the fires spread, devastating over 3,000 acres, killing one and reaching the dense urban areas of Beirut. On 17 October, the Civil Defence Force had finally put the fires out with help from Cyprus, Jordan, Italy and Greece. But the delay and destruction caused by the Lebanese government’s inability to put out the fires had enraged many in the country.

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Lebanon Unsettled’ website. Available at [www.lebanonunsettled.org](http://www.lebanonunsettled.org)

<sup>13</sup> ‘Fitch Downgrades Lebanon to “CCC”’, *Fitch Ratings*, August 2019, <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/fitch-downgrades-lebanon-to-ccc-23-08-2019> (accessed 25 May 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Hannes Baumann, ‘Dumping Humpty-Dumpty: Blockages and Opportunities for Lebanon’s Economy after the October 2019 Protests’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120/2 (2021), p. 456.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Roland Nassour, ‘The Struggle for the Bisri Valley’, in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019: Voices from the Revolution*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 277–85.

<sup>17</sup> Joumana Haddad, ‘Lebanon Is on Fire: The Lebanese government’s ineptitude has driven people to the streets’, *The New York Times*, October 2019.

It was in this context, of ever-increasing elite induced economic pressure and environmental disaster, that the news of the so-called ‘WhatsApp tax’ provoked large-scale anger in Lebanon. On 17 October 2019, the Government of Lebanon held a cabinet session to discuss several measures and tax increases aimed at raising state revenues in the face a series of financial crises. Thirty-six items were discussed that focused on austerity and tax rises. Included in this discussion was an increase in Value Added Tax (VAT) and a plan to charge US\$0.20 per day on Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calls. The fee to use VoIP would have meant a \$6 monthly fee to use (otherwise free) popular apps, such as WhatsApp, Skype, Viber, Facebook and Facetime. The VoIP tax became known as the WhatsApp tax. This tax is widely referred to by analysts as the central vector that drove people into open revolt that day.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 2: ‘The Kick Queen’ (the Arabic translates to ‘Charge!’). Image by Rami Kanso, 2019**

Following leaked reports to the media of the cabinet session and subsequent reports of the WhatsApp tax, a small group of protesters gathered in downtown Beirut and Hamra street to protest it. Demonstrators soon shut down the roads around the Parliament and the Serail in downtown Beirut, with state security forces and protesters clashing. Protesters blocked the Minister of Education Akram Chehayeb’s convoy from exiting the parliament building and Chehayeb’s bodyguard fired into the air to disperse the crowd. This act sparked outrage amongst the protesters. An infamous image of the ‘kick queen’ circulated on social media (see Figure 2), further fuelling the intensity of the protests. The demonstrations quickly escalated on 17 October and grew from a few hundred protesters to a few thousand by the early evening in Beirut. The revolt soon spread not only across

<sup>18</sup> For the full timeline of October 2019 and bibliography see ‘Lebanon Unsettled’ website. Available at [www.lebanonunsettled.org](http://www.lebanonunsettled.org)

Beirut but nation-wide, from the north to the south. Protesters moved quickly to block major highways and other key roads, bringing the country to a halt. The October 2019 uprisings had begun.

The significance of the October 2019 uprising was soon recognised by academics and a large scholarship has rapidly developed on the meaning, causes and consequences of the revolt. The literature on the uprisings has covered a broad array of topics, the main themes including: neoliberalism (detailed further below) and the labour movement,<sup>19</sup> sectarianism,<sup>20</sup> gender,<sup>21</sup> social media<sup>22</sup> and testimonies from protesters.<sup>23</sup>

A comparatively small but significant body of work has emerged that has been attentive to the spaces and places of the uprising (as detailed above). The scholarship focused on the urban spaces of the protest has discussed at length the activation of central squares and spaces in particular in Beirut and Tripoli, with some attention to other notable gatherings in towns and smaller cities, like Saida, Sour and Nabatiyeh.<sup>24</sup> While much of the writings

<sup>19</sup> See for instance, Baumann, 'Dumping Humpty-Dumpty'; Kamal Dib, 'Predator Neoliberalism Lebanon on the Brink of Disaster,' *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1 March 2020): pp. 3–22; Rima Majed, "'Sectarian neoliberalism' and the 2019 Uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq,' in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019: Voices from the Revolution*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 76–88; Lara Khattab, 'The Genealogy of Social and Political Mobilization in Lebanon under a Neoliberal Sectarian Regime (2009–2019),' *Globalizations* (2022), online first.

<sup>20</sup> Martada Al-Amine, 'The Lebanese Uprising through the Eyes of Loyalists,' in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 163–73; Abbas Assi, 'Sectarianism and the Failure of Lebanon's 2019 Uprising,' *Middle East Insights* 251 (2020); Tamirace Fakhoury, 'The Unmaking of Lebanon's Sectarian Order? The October Uprising and its Drivers,' *IAI Commentaries* 66 (November 2019); Ghanem, 'Spatial profanation of Lebanese sectarianism'; Rønn, 'The Struggle of Unifying a People in Fragments'; Sára Vértés, Chris van der Borgh and Antoine Buyse, 'Negotiating Civic Space in Lebanon: The Potential of Non-Sectarian Movements,' *Journal of Civil Society* 17/3–4 (2 October 2021): pp. 256–76.

<sup>21</sup> Sara Mourad, Sally Farhat and Jad Melki, 'Lebanon's 2019 Uprising: A Feminist Uprising or Feminized Media Sensationalism?' *Howard Journal of Communication* (2023), online first; Sara Mourad, 'Appearing as Women,' in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 140–51; Nay el Rahi, 'Clashing with the Patriarchy: The Promise of Potential as Politics,' in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, pp. 152–62.

<sup>22</sup> Louis Dima and Michelle Mielly, 'People on the tweets: Online collective identity narratives and temporality in the #LebaneseRevolution,' *Organization* 30 (2023), pp. 89–115; Jad Melki and Claudia Kozman, 'Selective Exposure During Uprisings: Examining the Public's News Consumption and Sharing Tendencies During the 2019 Lebanon Protests,' *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 (2020); Karim Merhej, 'The Lebanese Uprising in the Digital Age,' *Cyber Orient* 14 (2020): pp. 85–98; Rayane Al-Rammal, 'Digital Activism in Movement: The 2019 Lebanese Uprising's Art on Instagram,' in *The Global Politics of Artistic Engagement: Beyond the Arab Uprisings*, Pénélope Larzilliere, ed. (London: Brill, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Elias Dahrouge, Jihad Nammour and Ahmed Samy Lotf, 'The 17 October 2019 protests in Lebanon: Perceptions of Lebanese and non-Lebanese residents of Tripoli and surroundings,' *Global Campus Human Rights Journal* 4 (2020), pp. 488–516; Karam and Majed, eds, *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*; Khaled Ziadeh and Mohammed Abi Samra, eds, *Lebanon's October Uprising: Squares and Testimonies [Arabic]* (Doha: The Arab Centre for Political Studies and Research, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Abdo, 'Reconstructing the Uprising in Tripoli'; Fawaz and Serhan, 'Urban Revolutions'; Ghanem,

of the protests in these places emphasise the unity of the protesters across these spaces and their efforts to reclaim the ‘right to the city,’ a significant part of this literature has also highlighted how the public square contained and segmented the protest movement. The square brought people shoulder to shoulder, but within this density there existed a complex patchwork of class, gender and political divides.

Anne-Kirstine Rønn, for example, details the spatial order where protesters with ‘different tactical orientations were assigned different bases. As protesters could not compromise on how to use the same space, moving to different zones was seen as a way to coexist without disrupting each other.’<sup>25</sup> Tamim Abdo, who participated in protests in Tripoli’s Nour Square, details his experience that went from believing in the emancipatory potential of gathering in the square to one in which he perceived ‘the square as an alienating place.’<sup>26</sup> Tamim argues that the square in Tripoli became dominated by middle-class activism that excluded the poor and how Nour Square was soon infiltrated and taken over by counter-revolutionary forces.<sup>27</sup> ‘The limits of the square became the limits of the revolution,’ Abdo concludes.<sup>28</sup> Kosmatopoulos observed similar spatial divides in Beirut, where he noted around the Serail was a group of protesters ‘obviously poorer, angrier, willing to engage in acts of violent dissent’ while those in Martyrs’ Square, he suggests, were more middle-class and ‘seemed content with occupying space, along with more or less established parties and civil society initiatives, and celebrating the national uprising.’<sup>29</sup>

The city and the urban fabric are always social products resulting from conflicting social interests and values, the structuring of urban space and the contestation of it always involves the dominant and dominated. The urban significance of the October 2019 revolt is not only in the manner in which urban space facilitated the protest but the way in which demonstrators mobilised to transform the urban structure and created new social meanings. As I will detail in the final section, this was most notable in the blocking of highways and their subsequent transformation – even if only fleetingly – from spaces of mobility into places for claim and place making. This, along with the hierarchical diffusion of the revolt, is what marks October 2019 as the first fully urbanised revolt in Lebanon’s history. To comprehend this, we must firstly attend to the prevailing urban process that had been established and in which the urbanised revolt was both formed by and protested.

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‘Spatial Profanation of Lebanese Sectarianism’; Harb, ‘How Urban Space Shapes Collective Action’; Rønn, ‘The Struggle of Unifying a People in Fragments’; Sinno, ‘How People Reclaimed Public Spaces in Beirut during the 2019 Lebanese Uprising.’

<sup>25</sup> Rønn, ‘The Struggle of Unifying a People in Fragments’, p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> Abdo, ‘Reconstructing the Uprising in Tripoli’, p. 286.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Kosmatopoulos, ‘Unhatching the Egg in Lebanon’s 2019 Protests’, p. 448.

## Neoliberalism as an Urban Project

Several scholars have argued that the October 2019 revolt was a reaction against the neo-liberal system that was established by Rafik Hariri following the end of the Civil War.<sup>30</sup> The Whatsapp tax may have been the spark for the protest but demonstrators made clear that this was a revolt against the entire political class and the collapse in basic living standards in the country. In a survey of protesters covering the first two weeks of the protest, 87 percent of protesters cited economic reasons as the reasons behind their participation in the revolt.<sup>31</sup> October 2019 was an eruption of urban rage against rising unemployment, a decline in urban wages and basic urban services, such as water and electricity, and the extreme inequality that had become entrenched in the country. As Majed and Salman argue,

The uprising is a broad-based revolt against Lebanese-style neoliberalism – a kind of neoliberalism playing out in a context of elite-maintained sectarianism. The uprising is the first time since the end of the civil war in 1990 that large numbers have protested against both the ruling sectarian elites and the financial elite and banks they see as responsible for the crisis.<sup>32</sup>

Since the 2000s, neoliberalism had become a powerful explanatory framework by scholars for the kind of political and economic system that Rafik Hariri had established in Lebanon following the end of the Civil War.<sup>33</sup> Hannes Baumann, for instance, argues that Hariri utilised a global neoliberal template, which included privatisation, financialisation, fiscal austerity, urban redevelopment and public sector reform.<sup>34</sup> The two central pillars of this template were the reconstruction of downtown Beirut through the megaproject led by the urban development corporation Solidere and the anchoring of the Lebanese lira to the US dollar.<sup>35</sup> Both of these, Baumann argues, produced ‘rents’ – defined as super profits – that Hariri was able to appropriate in his competition against rival political elites who appropriated their own rents through the Lebanese state’s welfare agencies.<sup>36</sup>

The revolt of 2019 was, several scholars argue, a reaction to the inevitable collapse of the unsustainable neoliberal scheme that Hariri had established. The currency peg, Baumann notes, had been slowly unravelling over the past decade. The shift by Saudi Arabia, in particular, away from Saad Hariri and Lebanon resulted in a dramatic slowdown in dollar inflows into Lebanon: ‘By the summer of 2019, the central bank could no longer stem capital outflows. US dollars were becoming scarce.’<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See the literature on neoliberalism detailed above.

<sup>31</sup> Khater and Majed, ‘Lebanon’s 2019 October Revolution’, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Rima Majed and Lana Salman, ‘Lebanon’s Thawra,’ *Middle East Report (MERIP)* 292/293 (2019): p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Deen Sharp, ‘Between the Future and Survival in Lebanon: Corporate Urbanization’, PhD Dissertation, City University of New York, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon’s Neoliberal Reconstruction* (London: Hurst, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> For a full review of the scholarship on neoliberalism and Lebanon’s post-war reconstruction see Sharp, ‘Between the Future and Survival in Lebanon’.

<sup>36</sup> Baumann, *Citizen Hariri*.

<sup>37</sup> Baumann, ‘Dumping Humpty-Dumpty’, p. 459.

This neoliberal project resulted in the production of a particular urban state space in Lebanon. Beirut was further cemented as the political and economic centre of gravity for the country. Elite enclaves were established in areas like downtown Beirut, which not only featured luxury apartment buildings designed by some of the world's most prominent architects, but also exclusive high-end infrastructure such as fibre optics. Lebanon became a country dominated by real estate deals and construction companies, with these the top contributors to GDP, rather than industry and agriculture. This resulted in rapid urbanisation across the country. The displacement of Syrians into Lebanon following the Syrian uprising in 2011 further increased this rate of urbanisation. The UN estimates 89 percent of the population in Lebanon now live in cities and towns.<sup>38</sup>

Lebanon is a county in which society has been completely urbanised. The village, as both a unit and a way of life in Lebanon, has to a large extent been absorbed and obliterated by larger units, the presence of vacation homes, shopping malls, ski resorts, supermarkets, highways and hotels all forming this urban fabric. The Cascada Mall – also notably called Cascada Village – is just one example, located in the 'village' of Marj in the Bekaa Valley, home to Carrefour, a waterpark and numerous shops and restaurants. But broader investment in the urban fabric – in infrastructure and basic urban services (outside elite enclaves) – was collapsing. The intensive urbanisation has meant that collective consumption through urban services grew more important, but while the provision of public goods is necessary, as Castells has argued more broadly, it is unprofitable for private capital, subsequently pushing urban issues to the forefront of political conflicts.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> UN-Habitat Lebanon & ESCWA, *State of the Lebanese Cities* (Beirut, UN-Habitat Lebanon), p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*.

## You Stink



Figure 3: A river of trash, Photograph by Hasan Shaaban, 2015

In 2015, the collapsing urban infrastructure in Lebanon exploded onto the surface in the You Stink revolt (*Tol' et Rihetkun*). Garbage piled on to the streets of Beirut due to the closure of the main landfill without a replacement, as a result of political deadlock (see Figure 3). At the core of this protest was a loosely formed network that became known as 'You Stink'. The You Stink group outlined a set of demands which not only included the resolution of the garbage crisis but also targeted the broader collapse in governance rooted in Lebanon's neo-liberal sectarian political system. The mobilisation involved not only the You Stink network but a loose collection of activists joined by dozens of other groups that were referred to as *al-Hirak* ('the movement'). The You Stink protest resulted in unprecedented mobilisations of protesters in Beirut. The anger at the ruling elite over the garbage crisis and all that it represented was able to unite tens of thousands of Lebanese despite ever-present differences between the protestors. The protests peaked on 29 August and then petered out, as fatigue and fear set in, and old divides overcame the recent mobilisation of unity.

The You Stink protest had a lasting impact on Lebanon's politics. The legacy of the protest movement was clear in the 2016 municipal elections and the rise of the Beirut Madinati campaign.<sup>40</sup> While Beirut Madinati lost the municipal elections, it was able to launch one of the most significant attempts to take power away from the political elite on a non-sectarian platform within the confines of the electoral system. The influence of the You Stink protest, and the political momentum around the 2016 municipal election, was evident in the October 2019 protests. One of the principal slogans of the 2019 revolt was taken directly from the 2015 protest, "All of them" means "*all* of them."<sup>41</sup> As Mona Harb has noted, the significance of this slogan was that for the first time post-2006, activists requested accountability in unambiguous terms across the political spectrum for failed public services and corruption.<sup>41</sup>

The You Stink protest, however, much like all contemporary protest in Lebanon centred almost entirely around Beirut.<sup>42</sup> It was a city-centric, rather than fully urbanised, revolt. Smaller protests did erupt in Tripoli, Saida and other urban centres, but they soon dissipated.<sup>43</sup> The national crisis of urbanisation in Lebanon had always centred upon the municipal boundaries of Beirut until October 2019, when the urban crisis became a fully urbanised national revolt. It is the stark geographical breadth of the October 2019 revolt that makes it so distinct from all preceding protests. October 2019 was Lebanon's first fully urbanised revolt in which protests attempted to rework and change urban space to change society.

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<sup>40</sup> Deen Sharp, 'Beirut Madinati: Another Future Is Possible', *Middle East Institute*, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Mona Harb, 'New Forms of Youth Activism in Contested Cities: The Case of Beirut', *The International Spectator* 53 (2018): p. 87.

<sup>42</sup> For a full overview of the historical context of protest in Lebanon, see 'Lebanon Unsettled' website. Available at [www.lebanonunsettled.org](http://www.lebanonunsettled.org)

<sup>43</sup> Ziad Abu-Rish, 'Garbage Politics', *Middle East Report (MERIP)* 277 (2015).



## The Urbanisation of Revolt: October 2019 and the Highway

Barricades, the blocking of roads, have long been used as a tool in urban revolt.<sup>44</sup> Eric Hazan has argued that barricades died out in the twentieth century as a principal tool for revolt but more recently this tactic, along with other forms of spatial disruption, have experienced a resurgence in the twenty-first century, along with their theorisation.<sup>45</sup> Roadblocks have a history in Lebanon, though hardly an overly positive or liberatory one. According to one member of the Qantari Collective – a group that actively organised roadblocks, particularly in Beirut – the biggest spectre that haunted the group when blocking roads was the image of the barricades of the civil war. ‘Seeing us could trigger war memories for a certain generation, of barricades with ID controls and militia men deciding on who passes and who gets shot,’ they explained.<sup>46</sup> To counter that they explained their motives to drivers, distributing pamphlets that explained they were blocking the road due to the failure in basic urban services, elite abuse of power and traffic mismanagement. The pamphlet concluded, ‘Only this time, we are blocking the road, we can together stop all other roadblocks.’<sup>47</sup>

The speed and geographical breadth in which the barricades were set up was remarkable. ‘By midnight on 17 October most vital highways and roads were blocked,’ Nizar Hassan recounts. ‘In urban areas, even internal streets were blocked, usually by local working-class men and women burning dumpsters...in the middle of streets’ (see Figure 4).<sup>48</sup> Notably, protesters moved rapidly to block not only the streets and main traffic arteries in and around Beirut but moved through spontaneous uncoordinated – but critically simultaneous – action to stop traffic on major roads throughout the country. It is worth stressing how novel this was and for the protest not to simply concentrate in, and gravitate toward, Beirut. The author Camille Ammoun recalls how in 2005’s Independence Intifada political parties bussed people from around the country to Beirut to the protest.<sup>49</sup> But October 2019 was remarkable for the absence in the first weeks of the traditional parties’ openly visible presence and for the bottom-up character that also manifested itself in the geography of the revolt. Larissa Abou Harb, who participated in blocking the highway in Batroun, recalls how people were encouraged to protest in their own locality rather than just heading to Beirut, encouraged by the protests that erupted in Tripoli and in the South.<sup>50</sup>

The implication of this nation-wide blocking of mobility on the highways was to create an unofficial general strike. The sociologist Rima Majed claims that what makes this moment revolutionary is the mass strike, which in this protest meant the blocking of the highways that importantly were created ‘beyond the squares’ and indeed made the mass gatherings in

<sup>44</sup> Eric Hazan, *A History of the Barricade* (London: Verso, [2013] 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Charmaine Chua and Kai Bosworth, ‘Beyond the chokepoint: Blockades as Social Struggles’, *Antipode* 2023, online first.

<sup>46</sup> Nassif, ‘Roadblocking, Mass Strike and the Qantari Collective’, p. 264.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Hassan, ‘The Power and Limits of Blocking Roads’, pp. 175–6.

<sup>49</sup> Camille Ammoun, Recorded interview, July 2022, Lebanon.

<sup>50</sup> Larissa Abou Harb, Recorded interview, July 2022, Lebanon.

the squares possible. ‘This was really at the core of what happened,’ Majed states.<sup>51</sup> Members of the Qantari Collective explained, ‘We needed to block the traffic to provide an excuse for people not to go to work and be able to join the protests and to keep the universities closed, so students, who are the largest mass, could remain in the streets. Also, to emphasize that we the people own the streets and our battle with the regime is a street battle.’<sup>52</sup>



Figure 4: Protest on the Jel El-Deeb highway. Photography by Christina Karam, 2019

‘Roadblocking offered a shortcut,’ Hassan explains, ‘to achieving a general strike...to a population whose structural disruptive power had been curtailed by the postwar neo-liberal transformation of the Lebanese economy.’<sup>53</sup> The roadblocks created a ‘forced general strike’ because, Hassan writes, the ‘typical tools to achieve such a strike were not viable. This is because labor movements in Lebanon have been suppressed, defeated, and co-opted by the postwar ruling class.’<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL) did not call a strike and only made a statement three weeks into the uprising – met by dismay from protesters.<sup>55</sup> Chua and Bosworth argue that the con-

<sup>51</sup> Rima Majed, Recorded interview, July 2022, Lebanon.

<sup>52</sup> Nassif, ‘Roadblocking, Mass Strike and the Qantari Collective’, p. 264.

<sup>53</sup> Hassan, ‘The Power and Limits of Blocking Roads’, p. 174.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 176.

<sup>55</sup> Khattab, ‘The Genealogy of Social and Political Mobilization in Lebanon under a Neoliberal Sectarian Regime (2009-2019)’, p. 11; Statement by the Executive Council of the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers. Available at <https://shorturl.at/eNP16> (accessed 29 May 2023).

temporary global resurgence of blockades signals shifts in capitalist political economics including increasing labour repression, manufacturing decline, and reduced union density.<sup>56</sup> Road closures in the Lebanese context became a means to undertake a mass strike in the absence of any meaningful formal unionised body.<sup>57</sup>

The linear barricade itself did not become the focus point for protesters – rather, large crowds gathered in the centre of the highway, transforming this otherwise exclusive space for cars into a public one for pedestrians. A member of the Qantari Collective explained that ‘while deciding which roads to block and which cars to let by, we also accidentally decided on the means of transport that we wanted: motorbikes, bicycles, and pedestrians only. We reimagined a slower, smaller, friendlier, walkable city.’<sup>58</sup> In Beirut, the Ring Bridge – part of Beirut’s major ring road – quickly became a central space in the uprising. This urban space, usually dominated by cars, was transformed by demonstrators who reimagined this area as an outdoor apartment – adding their sofas, fridges and chairs. An online advert was even posted on the website Airbnb offering the opportunity to book a night in what was commonly known as the apartment of the people.



Figure 5: The Ring in Beirut. Photograph by Antoine Attallah, 2019

<sup>56</sup> Chua and Bosworth, ‘Beyond the chokepoint’, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Lebanon Unsettled, ‘The Geographies of October 2019’, 2023. Available at [www.lebanonunsettled.org](http://www.lebanonunsettled.org)

<sup>58</sup> Nassif, ‘Roadblocking, Mass Strike and the Qantari Collective’, p. 267.

Similar practices occurred in highways across the country. As one participant explained, the highways were forgotten spaces and in Jounieh were always congested: ‘we forgot that this place belongs to our city.’<sup>59</sup> ‘When I walked on the highway I discovered a new place in my city,’ they added, important because before October 2019 all protests were confined to Beirut, confining political life to the capital, while these protests gave all Lebanese the chance to protest in their own region. Another who joined the protest on the Zouq highway noted, ‘the best thing I remember about the protest was experiencing a space that was not previously accessible... I have never been as a pedestrian to a highway and it was very symbolic to me because finally we claimed a public space and we had access to a public space.’<sup>60</sup> The highway was not only blocked, its function was transformed from a space of mobility to a place of public revolt, play and debate. As another participant who protested on the Jel el-Dib highway noted,

The revolt made us see our city in a different way... who would have expected us to be laughing, crying, screaming in the middle of the highway, no one. This is what made it very special because we were appropriating the spaces and being ourselves for a short period of time.<sup>61</sup>

These actions took on the role of searching for ‘spatial meaningfulness and cultural identity.’<sup>62</sup> A local autonomy – through a national-scale practice of blocking highways – was established, in which not only demands were made but prevailing cultural values challenged, spatial forms transformed and new social meanings for urban space explored. This is what makes the October 2019 protest a fully urbanised revolt.

But the blocking of roads, always at first a highly localised practice, was tied to broader national practices and politics. The resignation of Hariri exposed the limitations of blocking highways and marked a major turning point in this practice. Hassan contends that while the roadblocks could replace union organisations in creating a mass general strike, they could not replace their ability to create a sustained political agenda.<sup>63</sup> Another drawback of barriers was their indiscriminate nature – it was not only those protesting the current system that could utilise them, and they could just as soon be turned into tools for protest suppression and counterrevolution. Tamim Abdo recalls how in Tripoli political parties started to send partisans to block roads pretending to be part of the popular movement.<sup>64</sup> After the resignation of Hariri, his supporters started to block roads in coordination with the army.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, as the October 2019 revolt began to sizzle out the barricades became more contentious and violent. State security forces started to open highways by force. On 25 November, a car accident killed two after – protesters claim – hitting a Lebanese army roadblock near a protest camp in Jiyeh, stoking sectarian tension. Hezbollah and Amal supporters accused protesters of being responsible for the car crash due to their roadblocks – violent attacks ensued. By March 2020 the Lebanese security forces had forcibly re-opened all roads blocked by demonstrators.

<sup>59</sup> Georges Hajj, Recorded interview, July 2022, Lebanon.

<sup>60</sup> Marcelle El Achkar, Recorded interview, July 2022, Lebanon.

<sup>61</sup> Christina Karam, Recorded interview, July 2022, Lebanon.

<sup>62</sup> Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*.

<sup>63</sup> Hassan, ‘The Power and Limits of Blocking Roads’, p. 183.

<sup>64</sup> Abdo, ‘Reconstructing the Uprising in Tripoli’, p. 290.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Since the October 2019 protests, Lebanon has had to contend with COVID-19, one of the most severe economic collapses on record globally, and the consequences of the 4 August 2020 Beirut Port explosion, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions to ever hit a city. Even among these polycrises, or perhaps because of them, the impact of the 2019 protests continue to resonate within Lebanese society. The October 2019 protest represents a flash of hope, a moment in which the populous was able to unite – despite the evident differences and divisions of class, sect and politics – against the country’s sclerotic ruling elite. Many of the political groups that formed during this period became officially registered parties.<sup>66</sup> In the 2022 general elections, several candidates were elected to the Lebanese parliament who were not aligned with traditional political parties. Despite the different politics between these candidates, many analysts consider them to constitute a revolutionary or independent bloc (albeit loose) within parliament, representative of the October uprising. In addition to new political groups, alternative labour movements also emerged, such as the Lebanese Professionals’ Association (LPA).<sup>67</sup> Relatedly, there have been several victories since the October uprising by independent candidates in syndical elections. The meaning and consequences of the 2019 protest movement are still being struggled over and created, an afterlife that continues to shadow contemporary struggles in Lebanon for a more dignified, just and equitable society.

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<sup>66</sup> Maria El Sammak, ‘Rethinking the Impact of the 2019 Popular Protests in Lebanon,’ *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 8 July 2022. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/07/08/rethinking-the-impact-of-the-2019-popular-protests-in-lebanon/> (accessed 25 May 2023).

<sup>67</sup> Nadim El Kak, ‘Lebanon’s Alternative Labor Movement: In between Collapse and Revolutionary Imaginaries’, in *The Lebanon Uprisings of 2019*, Karam and Majed, eds, p. 133.



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Protesters burning tyres at 'The Ring' in Beirut, October 2019.

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