

## Contesting Beirut's Frontiers

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### Abstract

On May 7, 2008, armed militias took to the streets of Beirut, Lebanon, in the worst sectarian fighting the city had seen since the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990). This paper argues that critical to the understanding of the contestations of post-civil war Beirut are the ways in which the production of mundane geographies (such as housing, roads, and industrial zones) by religious-political organizations have transformed Beirut's peripheral spaces into frontiers of conflict. These geographies are produced within planned and imagined geographies of local and regional wars that are “yet to come.” Based on ethnographic and archival research, this paper maps the transformation of what used to be a peripheral area into a religiously-contested frontier zone, where spatial contestation has become less about war maneuvering and more about the production of a spatial order of political difference through land markets, building and infrastructure construction, and urban regulations and zoning. The study provides insights into how the geographies of the civil war, economic post-war restructuring, resistance to Israel's incursions, the regional rise of Hezbollah's military power, the post-war crisis of war militias such as the PSP, along with the skyrocketing prohibitive costs of land and housing in municipal Beirut have been articulated in new robust, shifting divide lines that configure the urban politics of Beirut's peripheries. I illustrate how the practice of urban planning in Beirut involve innovative techniques to continuously “balance” a spatiality of political difference in order to keep a war at bay while simultaneously allowing for urban growth and development profit. [Religious-political organizations, urban planning, war yet to come, Beirut].

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On May 7, 2008, armed militias took to the streets of Beirut, Lebanon, in the worst sectarian fighting the city had seen since the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990).<sup>1</sup> During this conflict, the city's peripheral areas emerged as key battlegrounds. In particular, dozens were killed on Old Saida Road, which separates Choueifat from Sahra Choueifat southeast of the city center. What came to be known as the “May 7 events” solidified the status of this area as a key site of conflict between two religious-political organizations, the Shiite Hezbollah and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP).<sup>2</sup> While local discussions and media analyses have focused on the policies that led to the 2008 conflict and its repercussions, this paper examines how the planning of geographies of war during “times of peace” helped shape it.

Beirut is not new to wars. Many years of civil war have been fought there, and war, per se, does not serve as an emergent framework to understand patterns of urban development in the city. As this paper will show, what is critical to understand in the post-civil war era is how the

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production of mundane geographies (e.g. housing, roads, and industrial zones) by religious-political organizations has transformed the city's peripheral areas into new frontiers of conflict. These geographies are being produced according to planned and imagined geographies of local and regional wars "yet to come" (Bou Akar 2012). In other words, during "times of peace" conflict has continued, yet it has had less to do with military maneuver and positioning than with the production of a spatial order of sectarian and political difference. This spatial logic is configured through such mechanisms as land and housing markets, urban planning, and zoning regulations. To understand these processes, this paper maps the transformation of the peripheral area of Sahra Choueifat as a contested sectarian frontier. Sahra Choueifat is today a Shiite neighborhood in the making, regarded as a Hezbollah stronghold, yet historically it was Druze agricultural land. During the civil war, this vast area, parts of which border Beirut International Airport, was defended by Druze landowners against Shiite settlement. However, its urbanization began around 1993 following the development of few large-scale, low-income housing complexes, and the pace of transformation increased with the building of more affordable housing. In 2002, small-scale rioting and youth violence erupted between Shiite and Druze populations in the area, defining a new landscape of demarcation. This conflict took a dramatic turn on May 7, 2008, when these demarcation lines turned into battlegrounds. Four years later, a continuing parade of Lebanese army tanks separates areas claimed by the two groups to deter renewed conflict.

This paper focuses on Hezbollah and the PSP as the key actors in this transformation. Overall, the PSP is in control of the local government, the Choueifat municipality, while Hezbollah controls the area's real estate and housing markets. The PSP was established as a secular political party in 1949 and was responsible for a Druze militia during the civil war. Despite its disarmament at the end of the war, the PSP has remained an influential political actor in Lebanon. Hezbollah emerged in 1982 primarily to resist the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Depending on one's perspective, it can be considered a nongovernmental organization, a Lebanese political party, a resistance movement, and/or an armed organization central to the "War on Terror." Such categories, however, selectively emphasize or blur Hezbollah's various activities in the areas of politics, military organization, resistance to occupation, and service provision—all of which characterize its diverse activities.

The hybrid character of these two religious-political organizations makes their spatial interventions difficult to categorize. Each group is an amalgam of public and private actors, some have military wings and transnational structures. They cannot be confined to being called non-state actors or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), since they function simultaneously inside the government and outside it. Neither are they political parties in the traditional sense, since they are involved in many activities; they maintain militias, function as charities, serve as NGOs that process international donations and administer social services (Fawaz 1998; Harb 2008). Therefore, to understand the production

of new sectarian geographies in peripheral areas like Sahra Choueifat and how these led to the 2008 conflict, I approach these organizations not as discrete entities but as constellations of public and private actors. Individuals within these networks may range from street-level bureaucrats, to heads of municipalities, ministers and parliamentarians, draftsmen in planning agencies, housing developers, real estate brokers, religious charity workers, micro-loan officers, and workers in an asphalt company. To date, discussion of planning and urban development in post-war Beirut has primarily focused on two topics: large-scale planning projects and the city's informal periphery. Areas like Sahra Choueifat, peripheral yet formal, planned yet contested, remain understudied.<sup>3</sup>

Conflicts surrounding large-scale planning and construction projects have come to define the "formal" planning scene of post-war Beirut. The highest profile of these is Beirut's Central District, which has been undergoing reconstruction by the real estate company Solidere (Sawalha 1998). Elyssar and Linord, two unrealized grand planning projects for Beirut's southern and northern coastal suburbs respectively, have also been discussed (Rowe and Sarkis 1998; Harb 2001). More recently, Project Waad, Hezbollah's large-scale effort to reconstruct Beirut's southern suburbs (which were largely destroyed during the July 2006 war with Israel) has been the subject of several studies (Ghandour and Fawaz 2008; Harb 2008; Fawaz 2009; Al-Harithy 2010). Scholars have foregrounded the relevance of Beirut's informal settlements to understand the production of space in the city (Hamadeh 1987; Charafeddine 1991; Harb 2001; Fawaz 2004; Clerc 2008). Of these, Fawaz's (2004) study of Hayy el-Selloum (informal settlement just north of Sahra Choueifat), provides key insights about the entanglement of formal practices in the production of informality in Beirut.

The question remains, however: what mechanisms govern the production of other mundane, yet (mostly) formal, spaces in the city? This question became more pressing after May 2008, when liminal areas became the frontlines of new deadly sectarian battles. It is in peripheries-turned-frontiers areas like Sahra Choueifat that one can understand how the spatiality of everyday life is produced and contested by religious-political organizations. Here one can map the development of conflicts over time and the "imaginative geographies" (Gregory 2004) active in spatially constructing the religious other as a threat. In these peripheral areas-turned-frontiers new cycles of sectarian violence are being enacted, produced, and reproduced.

After a note on method, I situate Sahra Choueifat as a periphery and illustrate spatial practices which shaped it by 2008 as a frontier of both urban growth and conflict. I map this transformation by illustrating the intervention by religious-political organizations in land and housing markets as well as zoning and urban planning practices. I discuss the significance of this transformation by engaging theoretical debates on the transformation of urban peripheries into frontiers of conflict and by examining the role of urban planning in producing such contested geographies.

## A note on method

Research for this study encompassed archival and ethnographic work conducted over two time periods: before the May 2008 events (2004–2005), and after (2009–2010). These timeframes were critical to understanding how the transformation of a periphery into a frontier changed and became rearticulated over time.<sup>4</sup> Examining the transformation of a peripheral area into a polarized and contested frontier is a complex exercise in a deeply divided city like Beirut, where one is always categorized as “with” or “against” this or that group. The research necessitated crossing emergent dividing lines again and again—both physical ones produced by the May 2008 battles and consequent social, political, and psychological ones.

Sahra Choueifat is a “zone of awkward engagement” where entities think, speak, and approach its transformation quite differently (Tsing 2005). In particular, what is considered by some a “natural,” market-led urban expansion of the city into its peripheries is deemed an “encroachment” by others. Because of the spatial practices of prominent religious-political organizations, these are no transparent, open sites of engagement. Researching their construction in a context of fear and violence necessitated a flexible approach to sites, actors, and political arenas. My approach to the area took into account emerging possibilities and obstacles, openings and closures, as new national and local political alliances developed while others dissolved, especially around the parliamentary elections in 2009 and the municipal elections in 2010.

This study is an ethnography of spatial practices. I seek to understand the multitude of practices, policies, and discourses that produced Sahra Choueifat as a contested frontier in 2008. My research focused on how “representations of space,” such as maps, plans reports, and statistics, have been produced, discussed, and changed over time (Lefebvre 1991), and what their spatial and material affects have been in terms of housing security, displacement, violence, and environmental degradation. I examined circulating discourses of fear, rumors of conflict, and talk of war as they produced the spatiality of everyday life (Taussig 1984; Caldeira 2000). I traced housing trajectories of a group of war-displaced families who eventually settled in Sahra Choueifat (Bou Akar 2005). Through an ethnography of spatial practices, I analyzed what Feldman described in his seminal work about violence in Belfast as the

temporal and semantic tensions . . . located between the ongoing deformation and reformation of material and experiential spheres by violence and the authorizing narrative or institution that legitimize that violence, be it the state, various imagined communities of nationalist and ethnic identification, territorial referents, civil laws, or origin myths (1991:2).

Living in the Choueifat area during my fieldwork, I was able to engage with many people who were directly and indirectly involved in its transformation. My interlocutors in Choueifat and Sahra Choueifat included

residents, municipal officials, developers, planners, landowners, real estate brokers, officials from the religious-political organizations, intellectuals, and former militiamen. Yet, despite lengthy engagement with my research sites (more than ten years), my access to information was always mediated and needed to be negotiated over time. In addition to observing conditions and conducting interviews in housing complexes in Sahra Choueifat and in Choueifat's municipal offices, I observed, interviewed, and engaged with interlocutors in communal spaces like cafés, beauty salons, grocery stores, and the gym. Since practices of zoning and urban planning in Sahra Choueifat take place on multiple bureaucratic levels, from the municipality to the nation, I conducted observations and interviews with planners and heads of planning units in different public agencies and private companies.

Due to the lack of official archives or a national census since 1932, my historical research on political events, planning, development, contestation, and war draws on newspaper archives, the American University of Beirut libraries, and records stored in public administration offices (municipalities, ministries, councils, etc). From municipalities, ministries, private planning companies, and public councils, I collected reports, plans, maps, building laws, and official documents on implemented, deferred, and proposed urban regulations, infrastructure construction, and master planning. In addition, I gathered information, data, and discourses as presented in news reports and in visual and virtual media in national and local political arenas. These research methods resulted in a situated understanding of the changing geography of Sahra Choueifat as produced and contested through master plans, territorial struggles, and everyday discourses of fear, tolerance, coexistence, and conflict.

### Situating a periphery: Sahra Choueifat

Sahra Choueifat is a peripheral area in the vicinity of Beirut International Airport. One would only pass through it if one worked or lived there, and its roads are barely maintained. Residential buildings stand between patches of agricultural land, greenhouses, and industrial complexes. Some of these structures are part of high-density complexes with open spaces in the middle, while others stand as unfinished apartment blocks amidst seasonal fields of strawberries, tomatoes, or herbs. Many buildings are colored with horizontal stripes: blue-white, brick-beige, green-white. The largest 200-unit complex is painted in gray and white. In between the stripes are curtains that fully enclose balconies for privacy.

The area is located in the jurisdiction of Choueifat, a town thirteen kilometers southeast of Beirut. With the airport largely within its municipal boundaries, Choueifat is almost the same physical size of Beirut. It has three hills that rise 150 meters above sea level and slope down to the Mediterranean Sea. A main road, Old Saida Road, separates the hills from the plain. Sahra Choueifat refers to a portion of the plain area, with

the airport at its edge blocking access to the sea. To its north is the informal settlement of Hayy el-Selloum, also mostly within Choueifat's jurisdiction. Before the civil war, land in the area was owned by Druze and Christian families. The civil war displaced most Christian families from Choueifat, many of them eventually sold their holdings in the area.

In the social geography of Lebanon, Sahra Choueifat occupies a place of strategic and geo-political importance (Figure 1). Formerly agricultural land, it today lies between residential areas ascribed to different religious groups: Druze, Shiite, Sunni, and Christian. Thus Sahra Choueifat is a prime location for understanding how spatial contestation by religious-political organizations continues to shape the geography of post-war Beirut.

Over time, Sahra Choueifat was developed from a predominantly agricultural area to an industrial and residential one. Longtime residents still remember when the quarter contained olive groves that produced the highest quality olive oil. In 1970 most of the area was zoned for residential development, including a small industrial strip alongside the airport. Yet during the civil war (in contrast to Hayy el-Selloum) the area did not develop residentially. It was forcefully protected by the PSP militia

against any residential expansion. Instead, Sahra Choueifat functioned as an agricultural and industrial center for West Beirut.<sup>5</sup>

The end of the civil war in 1990 marked a new phase of construction and urbanization for Beirut and its peripheries. The beginning of the controversial postwar reconstruction project Solidere in 1992 was accompanied by a political decision to evict war-displaced squatters from municipal Beirut. Since housing in Beirut was not affordable to many of these families, their main destinations were the immediate southern suburbs (known as Al-Dahiya) and distant surrounding areas. Second-tier peripheries, like Sahra Choueifat, where land was cheap and could be developed relatively easily, became plausible new residential sites for the poorer segment of this population. Between 1993 and 1996 a massive construction boom unfolded from the Old Saida Road. In 2004, the families I interviewed in these new complexes were mostly low-income Shiites. Many had originally been displaced from villages in South Lebanon and had squatted for more than a decade or two in abandoned

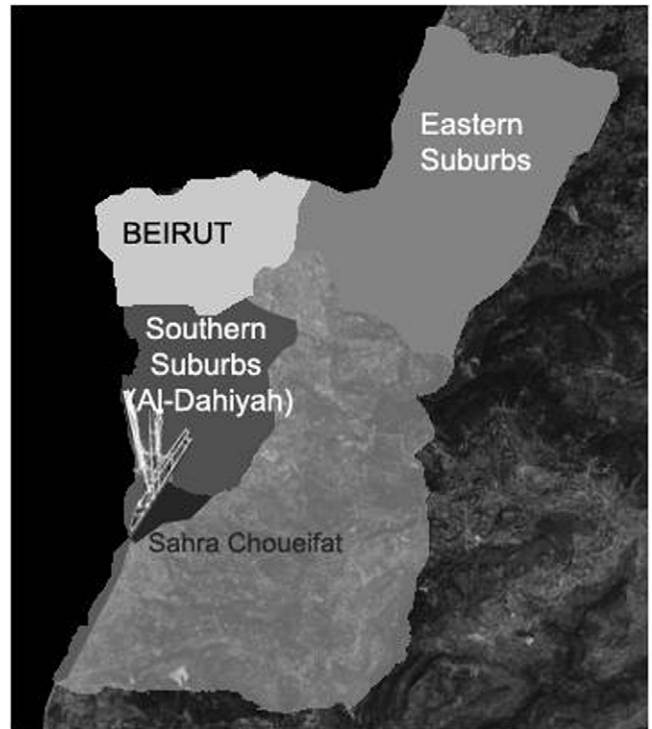


Figure 1. The contentious geo-political location of Sahra Choueifat.

buildings in the city center or in war-scarred buildings along its famous demarcation line. With the end of the civil war, these families were once more displaced, this time by post-war construction and infrastructure projects.

While most of the southern suburbs where the war-displaced moved were part of Al-Dahiya, Sahra Choueifat, initially, was not. In 2001 Harb identified Al-Dahiya geographically as the zone extending south of Beirut to the airport and east to the agricultural fields of Hadath and Choueifat. "The suburb" conveys emotionally charged referents that are often propagated by the media but also used by many Lebanese citizens. These discourses describe the suburb as a misery belt characterized by illegal urbanization, squatters, and underdevelopment. Another term often used is "Hezbollah suburb" connoting an Islamist suburb where "poor Shiites" live. Following Harb's definition, however, by 2001 Sahra Choueifat was increasingly seen as part of Hezbollah's Al-Dahiya. Choueifat's older residents, on the other hand, especially PSP's affiliates, saw its development as an "invasion" of their territory. By 2008, this area, previously part of Beirut's undeveloped periphery, had emerged as a critical frontier in the battle between religious-political organizations over the production of the city's post-war urban geography.

The expansion of the Shiite Al-Dahiya to the Druze Choueifat seems to have been a concern for Choueifat's residents even before the end of the civil war. Writing during the war on the problematic of informal settlements, Hamadeh stated that while Sahra Choueifat might be the most appropriate relocation site, this option was not possible for political reasons: "It is an important real estate reserve of 1.75 square mile, almost as large as the Airport. It is . . . considered Druze territory. . . . It is for political and religious reasons that the extension of the Shiite illegal sector of Hay el-Selloum, north of it was always impossible" (1987:80). Moreover, after the war one expert report on the residential sector in Beirut discussed Sahra Choueifat as a source of conflict with regard to planned urban growth in the southern suburbs:

If a new plan supplying 10,000 units in Choueifat area, currently proposed by the government is implemented, it will occupy 15% of the general available build out. In this area, the majority of the population is Druze. This group has strongly opposed the new housing projects in that area, as they will bring other ethnic groups [in reference to the Shiites] into this Druze stronghold. (Kazzaz et al. 1993:39)

Both these reports explained the logic of contestation in the development of Sahra Choueifat as it would unfold between incoming Shiites and the original Druze landowners who still lived in the area. As a result, what did not happen informally at the time of the war through the extension of Hay el-Selloum, or formally afterwards through various potential scenarios by which the government might have provided affordable housing, occurred through private real estate and housing markets, accompanied by planning and zoning battles.

## Building the periphery, constructing the frontier

**Z**eina and Imm Yasmine are two residents of Sahra Choueifat. Zeina is originally from South Lebanon. In 1976, following the bombing of her village, she and her family fled their house to a neighboring village. Then they temporarily sought refuge in Beirut. For the next 28 years, Zeina and her family remained in an abandoned building along Beirut's former war demarcation line. In 2001, with news of their pending eviction, Zeina and her sons bought, with the help of her politically affiliated brother-in-law, apartments in Sahra Choueifat. In August 2004, after receiving final eviction notices, they moved to Sahra Choueifat. Two of Zeina's sisters moved to the same apartment complex. Imm Yasmine moved to Sahra Choueifat four years before Zeina. She bought an apartment in 1997. She was also originally displaced from southern Lebanon, and had lived in downtown Beirut for twenty years. One day, while sipping coffee on her balcony overlooking a stretch of greenhouses, I asked Imm Yasmine about what she liked most about her residence. She pointed to the fields and replied, "You know, people tell me that these empty lands are all zoned agriculture, so no new buildings will ever block our view. True, we are far from the city, but unlike the dense Al-Dahiya, it is quiet and green here." Her sister had less success moving to the area. She had bought an apartment from a different developer in the housing complex next door. This developer never finished the building, and her sister had not received a title deed for her apartment.

While Imm Yasmine's case illustrates how the urban development of Sahra Choueifat provided her with the possibility of affordable housing close to Beirut, her sister's case illustrates some of the difficulties in developing the area. Starting in 1993 the development of an affordable housing complex in Sahra Choueifat was a complex and contested process. It necessitated at least the following: changing the zoning of the area in which the project would be built, a large-scale housing developer to build it, brokers to buy land from original owners, building permits approved by the PSP municipality Choueifat, war-displaced buyers who were looking for affordable housing in the city, and a network of people to help sell the apartments. In addition, developers and residents had to come together, supported by Hezbollah, to install infrastructure, because the PSP-led municipality of Choueifat was intent on delaying the development process. In one complex, Naji, a resident who is a public utility electrician, volunteered to run wires to a number of buildings that were not connected to the power grid. Likewise, his friend, Asem, who worked as a driver for an asphalt company, would leave a bit of asphalt in his truck at the end of every day and use it to pave roads in the neighborhood. Simultaneously, the PSP was busy working to change the area's zoning from residential to industrial. In 2003, Hezbollah erected arches around the area that featured pictures of martyrs and slogans of resistance. Druze residents of nearby Choueifat took those public displays of affiliation as an intimidating announcement that Sahra Choueifat was a "Hezbollah area."

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As if to confirm these fears, in July 2006, some residential complexes in Sahra Choueifat were targeted for attack by Israel and bombed as part of Israel's attacks on Hezbollah's larger stronghold of Al-Dahiya during the July 2006 war in Lebanon. In May 2008, people from the two neighborhoods fought their battles. After the clashes the road between Sahra Choueifat and the older developed areas of the town solidified into a dividing line between them.

## From a Druze agricultural periphery to a Shiite residential frontier

For years Druze landowners had protected Sahra Choueifat from informal land invasions like those that shaped neighboring Hayy el-Selloum. However, three factors finally facilitated its transformation from an agricultural area into a low-income Shiite residential area and Hezbollah stronghold.

- (1) War-displaced compensation policies. One of the most important policies of the post-war governments of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was to give monetary relocation packages to families displaced by the

civil war who had come to Beirut to squat in its abandoned buildings (Figure 2). Such a policy aligned with the government's agenda of neoliberal economic restructuring and its desire to redevelop the central city as an area for business, tourism, and upscale housing. Instead of developing a comprehensive relief and reconstruction plan, which might have helped low-income residents to find housing in the city (after having lived in the city for 30 years), the government opted for a hands-off approach to the war-displaced. Typically, families were given short eviction notices and small compensation packages (official packages were \$5,000–7,000; many families were able to secure more through political affiliations). In the absence of alternatives, religious-political organizations stepped in to mediate between families and the government. The government's compensation packages were naively intended to allow



Figure 2. Two evacuated buildings in Hayy Madif Mar Michael Church neighborhood: an example of abandoned buildings where families settled who fled battles in South Lebanon in 1977. Many stayed there until 2004. Photo by author.

the war-displaced to return “home,” i.e., to villages they had left more than 20 years earlier. But home for a large percentage of the war-displaced was now Beirut (Sawalha 2010). On the verge of eviction, families often had no choice but to buy low-cost housing in an extremely tight market. Hezbollah, interested in keeping its population base centralized in the city, intervened in land and housing markets. And as explained to me by many party members, planners, and municipal officials, Sahra Choueifat was the only possible “natural extension” to Hezbollah’s stronghold in Al-Dahiya. In succeeding years, through affiliated housing developers, Hezbollah channeled people, through various incentives, to new, low-cost apartments in Sahra Choueifat (Figure 3). Developers created



Figure 3. View of three housing complexes in Sahra Choueifat. Photo by author.

options for war-displaced families to purchase apartments that took into consideration their expected compensation packages and that featured insignificant down payments and lenient payment structures. The effort to recruit buyers was further facilitated by a network of developers’ offices located in the neighborhoods where large numbers of war-displaced families were squatting. It is important to emphasize, that Hezbollah did not directly house its supporters. Their approach was not top-down; rather it created what I call a “channeled” market that eventually ensured that many of the war-displaced families moved to Sahra Choueifat.

- (2) The failure of Sahra Choueifat as an industrial zone. In the post-war, high-growth days of the early 1990s, Sahra Choueifat’s landowners were promised that the area would be transformed into a cutting-edge industrial zone animated by its proximity to the airport. Residents, planners, and political officials described how Prime Minister Hariri and his planning team had discussed the future of Sahra Choueifat as a regional industrial, storage, and packaging center close to the airport. According to one official, a Boston-based firm was hired to put together a vision for the area. Initially, land prices boomed. However, the economic crisis that hit Lebanon in 1996 foiled the plan. When land prices fell, many landowners were ready to sell their holdings in exchange for a more secure source of income. At that moment, Hezbollah-affiliated developers stepped in to buy the land, offering much more for it than its depreciated market value as industrial land. Many of the landowners sold their holdings as an “income-security

strategy,” as one landowner described it to me, not caring much to whom they sold it or for what purpose.

- (3) Sahra Choueifat’s transformation into a real estate market. After the failure to transform Sahra Choueifat into a cutting edge industrial area, landowners pursued one-to-one transactions to sell what they viewed as depreciated, “unproductive” assets. They were unconcerned how their individual sales would combine to produce a new geo-political picture. Fifteen years later these real estate transactions created a situation which forms the basis for new political discourses, practices, and rounds of conflict that shaped Choueifat as a frontier of growth and violence. In transforming the area into a residential zone, Hezbollah used the real-estate market instead of going through formal planning channels. By using market mechanisms alongside sympathetic developers, Hezbollah avoided the aforementioned political resistance of Choueifat’s residents, had Sahra Choueifat’s urban development been discussed publicly. Building on mostly agricultural land, Hezbollah-supported developers, without help from the PSP-dominated municipality, also installed their own sanitation infrastructure (each new resident family also had to contribute \$100 toward this network). Planners I interviewed remarked that affiliated developers were given access to cheap loans by Hezbollah-affiliated institutions.

*Older residents of Choueifat were uncomfortable when they saw low-cost residential complexes, dominated by Shiites, mushrooming nearby*

What had started as a market-based phenomenon soon transformed into a new spatial practice, “the domino effect,” as many of the Druze residents of Choueifat I interviewed described it. As soon as a landowner learned that a neighboring plot had been sold to a Shiite, she or he, too, became ready to sell. During my fieldwork, this domino process was often described in charged, essentialist, sectarian terms toward the religious other. In a conversation with me on the sidewalk in the old area of Choueifat, four elderly Druze residents claimed that initially most of Sahra Choueifat’s agricultural land had been sold to Shiite developers by civil war displaced or immigrant Christian landowners. The Druze landowners only followed suit, they said. Rachid explained: “Let’s not hide from reality. As we recover from fifteen years of civil war, it has not been easy to accept the idea of coexistence with other sects, especially that they may cause a threat to our traditions and ways of life.” Older residents of Choueifat were uncomfortable when they saw low-cost residential complexes, dominated by Shiites, mushrooming nearby. Yet the Shiite families who moved to Sahra Choueifat were not able to translate their growing numbers into local political power because of Lebanese sectarian voting laws that stipulate that people can vote only in their areas of origin. Thus, many newcomers to Sahra Choueifat, unlike longterm local residents, were unrepresented in the Choueifat municipality. Subsequently, the contest over territory moved into the public arenas of planning, zoning, and legal challenges.

The first housing complex (it remains the largest in the area) included twelve buildings with about 200 units. Neighboring projects range in size

from those that encompass two to three buildings to larger ones. To build and market these projects, developers relied on social networks, philanthropic intermediaries, women's groups, and sophisticated incentives to recruit chains of related families. One of the main developers used what they called a "ticketing system" to motivate buyers, particularly women, to encourage relatives and friends to acquire housing in the same complex. A payment of \$300 was waived for each owner for every new buyer they could recruit. People thus encouraged family members, former neighbors who had also been displaced, and friends to also buy in Sahra Choueifat. Hadia, who had convinced eight of her acquaintances to buy apartments in her complex, had her entire first year of monthly mortgage payments waived.<sup>6</sup> Ticketing was a successful private business strategy that successfully channeled a large Shiite population to Sahra Choueifat.

Since most of the people living in war-scarred neighborhoods were interconnected through loyalty to Hezbollah, through kinship and family relations, it did not take long before entire families moved to Sahra Choueifat. The fact that politically affiliated developers did not formally advertise their new apartments left only a minute possibility that people from outside the targeted population would buy them. In addition, despite Sahra Choueifat being mostly a formal neighborhood, in coordination with other parties, Hezbollah took charge of regulating and managing the expansion of the area. Along with the other Shiite religious-political organization, Haraket Amal, it helped organize and fund the installation of water, sewage, and power infrastructure. While such a strategy helped war-displaced communities relocate together and provided them with affordable housing, it also initiated the formation of a Shiite religious enclave, setting the stage for the May 2008 violence.

Sahra Choueifat's lucrative real estate business and the support it enjoyed from organizations like Hezbollah and Haraket Amal provided incentives for nonaffiliated, independent developers to enter the housing-construction market in the area. Most of these failed to deliver on their promises. In 2004, many of these projects, like the one in which Imm Yasmine's sister lived, were managed by banks, which had taken them over after their developers had defaulted on their loans. Two independent developers told me that this happened because they could not match the low prices of apartments in Hezbollah-supported developments (in 1994, 64-square-meter apartments in Sahra Choueifat were being sold for \$18,000, in comparison to \$30,000 for similar apartments in neighboring areas). Residents of unfinished projects, however, did not acquire individual tenure deeds for their apartments, despite having in some cases almost fully paid for them.

## Understanding Sahra Choueifat

In order to understand how the transformation of Sahra Choueifat from a peripheral agricultural space to a primary frontier of growth and local and regional violence, it is important to understand the ways in which Sahra Choueifat has been spatially produced as one of Hezbollah's

“spaces of resistance” against Israel’s colonialism and Western imperialism. This entails examining the ways in which religious-political organizations, Hezbollah in particular, engaged with the Lebanese government’s post-war neoliberal economic policies—such as the decision to give monetary compensations to war displaced families to return to their villages.

Within contemporary discourse on “alternative” actors (such as NGOs and religious charities) and neoliberalism, there is a tendency to view such organizations as either local agents of the world capitalist system (whether celebrated or condemned) or entirely outside it. In Turkey, for example, the infusion of Islam into the neoliberal state has led many scholars to argue that Islamic religious-political organizations have become agents of neoliberalism (Tuğal 2009). However, other Islamic organizations (one of which is Hezbollah) have been theorized as operating outside the capitalist system (Watts 2003). Such actors thus are assumed to “announce to society that something ‘else’ is possible” (Melucci 1989:812 quoted in Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley 2004:873). According to this perceived dichotomy, it has been unusual to talk about Hezbollah’s spatial practices as neoliberal especially in the period before the initiation of Project Waad in 2007. The organization has often been characterized (and, indeed, it portrays itself) as a provider of services for the poor, an Islamic welfare NGO (Fawaz 2000; Harb 2001). It has taken a vocal stance against policies considered Western and imperialist (Bello 2007). And it has been active in the landscape of what Watts (2007) defined as “revolutionary Islam.” Recent discussions, however, have raised the question of Hezbollah’s role within a neoliberal regime. Principally, it has been pointed out that the organization has been a benefactor of the rollback of Lebanese state programs. Fawaz, in her discussion of Hezbollah’s top-down approach to the Waad Project, argues that “the current neo-liberal policy turn that delegates social services to non-state actors may witness and even strengthen the role of actors others than those expected by market proponents” (2009:330). Such actors operate neoliberal regimes of civic governmentality where the “urban subject is simultaneously empowered and self-disciplined, civil and mobilized, displaced and compensated” (Roy 2009a:161).

The case of Sahra Choueifat extends these arguments. It shows that Hezbollah’s role in the development of this area is neither that of a “neoliberal regime tool” emerging within the “neoliberal roll back of the state” nor an “alternative non-state organization” carving its niche outside the capitalist system. Clearly, Hezbollah and the neoliberal economic order are not antithetical. The possibility of a Hezbollah stronghold in Sahra Choueifat can only be understood in terms of the engagement of actors, like Hezbollah, with the neoliberal economic order (policies to free markets, privatize welfare, etc.). Hezbollah used land and housing markets, opened up investment for unsubsidized developers, engaged with Lebanese government policies toward the war-displaced, and worked closely with private planning companies that do most of the “public” planning in Lebanon. Rather than merely locating

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Hezbollah as either within or outside the neoliberal economic order, the transformation of Sahra Choueifat shows how what came to be seen as Hezbollah's spaces are in fact produced by the continuities and discontinuities of neoliberal practices with practices of religious affiliation, sectarian constructions, service provision, resistance ideologies, and militarization. By spatially mapping Hezbollah to Sahra Choueifat as an extension of Al-Dahiya, the area was targeted during Israeli's July 2006 war on Lebanon.

## Planning Sahra Choueifat

While the development of Sahra Choueifat took place through private land and housing markets, the contest over its expansion unfolds mostly through public battles over zoning, planning, and building law within several government agencies. These include the municipality of Choueifat, which until May 2010 was controlled by the main Druze political party, the PSP. By 1996, the area of Sahra Choueifat was administered under the 1970 zoning law, which characterized it as a low-density residential extension area where agricultural and industrial uses remained. When the first large housing complexes emerged, political pressures produced by overlapping interests of the PSP and the Hariri government caused the entire area to be rezoned for industrial use. But since these plans succumbed to the economic collapse of 1996, the area's zoning has been modified at least eight times between residential and industrial, not counting the nonformalized changes (Figure 4).

While Hezbollah had been pushing to zone the area for high-density residential development, the PSP-dominated municipality wanted it zoned industrial. Zoning designations are not easy to change in Lebanon. In order to do so, a proposed master plan must be endorsed by the Directorate General of Urbanism and studied by the prime minister's advisory board on planning and development and the council of ministers. If approved, the legal change is then issued as a government decree signed by the president of the Lebanese Republic, the Prime Minister of the Lebanese government, and the concerned Ministers which always includes the Minister of Public Works and Transportation. The decree is published in the official gazette and immediately applicable. Considering this cumbersome process, it is indicative of the high stakes in the contest over Sahra Choueifat that the different parties have managed to make large-scale legal changes to its zoning eight times in twelve years, resulting in a patchwork of competing residential, industrial and agricultural developments.

Starting in 2002, an increase in sectarian tension in Lebanon began to manifest itself in the area. As mentioned, Hezbollah erected structures bearing political slogans and pictures of martyrs on the streets leading to Sahra Choueifat. It also sponsored or encouraged the construction of communal spaces such as mosques, basketball courts, and coffee shops for the elderly, and it provided periodic maintenance of infrastructure to give incentives for people to move to Sahra Choueifat

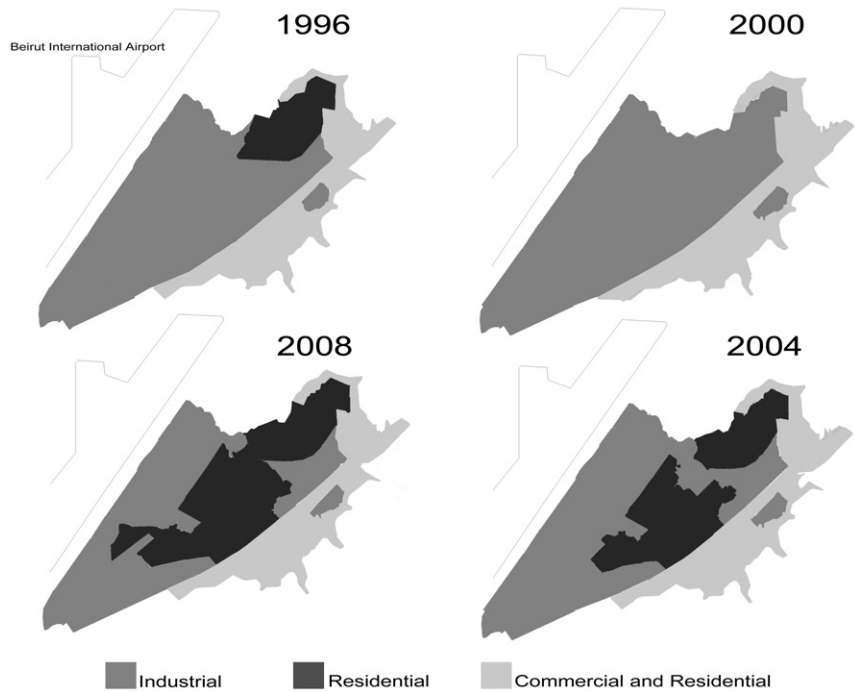


Figure 4. *Between the industrial and the residential. Changing the zoning of Sahra Choueifat. Map by author.*

(Bou Akar 2005). Non-Shiite Choueifat residents and rival religious-political organizations saw these actions as an encroachment on their territory. Soon, episodes of youth violence began on the Old Saida Road between the two neighborhoods.

The events of May 7, 2008, consolidated a new territorial reality. Old Saida Road, which separates Choueifat from Sahra Choueifat, was the site of that conflict's ugliest battles. During my pre-May 2008 fieldwork, officials in the municipality and some of the landowners were hesitant to talk openly in essentialist sectarian terms about the development of Sahra Choueifat. Many officials claimed that land-pricing rationality was the sole grounds on which the zoning had been repeatedly changed.

In order to understand what "economic rationale" might explain such rapid zoning and planning changes, I interviewed different actors (planners, economists, officials, landowners, real estate brokers) about how land pricing had functioned in the area over time. I focused my questions on the differential prices between industrial and residential sales. People drew me graphs and tables and wrote down complex economic equations that they claimed as justification for the differential land-pricing rationales. However, few of the stories were consistent. For example, one real estate economist told me that high demand for residential land made residentially zoned land more expensive and lucrative than industrial land. Another planner told me that due to the scarcity of industrial land in Beirut's peripheries, industrial zoning was more profitable for landowners. Others were keen on linking Sahra Choueifat's land prices to a national socio-economic discourse. One engineer and his economist friend argued that

The bird's eye view of the low-income Sahra Choueifat buildings—despite it being a formal area—has major repercussions on national tourism and flows of money into the country. Do you think foreigners greeted with this unruly sight of Sahra Choueifat as they approach Beirut from the air would still invest in Lebanon?

They concluded, “prices should make it unprofitable for low-income residential developments here in order to protect national tourism and foreign investment.”

After May 2008 discourses shifted, exposing people's fears and anxieties. Changes that were previously described as “normal” planning exercises (folded inside zoning and planning wars) now were openly articulated as security measures that would “curb the threat” to Choueifat and its existence, and protect Choueifat from another outbreak like the “May 7 events.” The same municipal office that told me in 2004 that their job was “simply technical, to make sure that construction follows the laws,” stated openly in 2009 that “we have been all along trying to stop this influx that attempts to take over ‘our area.’”

In 2008, taking advantage of the twists and turns of political alliances in Lebanon, the PSP-influenced municipality of Choueifat convinced ministers to approve a new zoning plan. The plan decreased the areas designated as residential and decreased the percentage of land surface exploitation and the number of floors allowed per plot. It required that more costly finishing materials be used on building façades (stone cladding instead of paint). This plan was an attempt to modify the socioeconomic background of Sahra Choueifat's future residents. It would lead, according to one planner, to fewer apartments per plot, lower overall population density, and higher apartment prices. If it was to be impossible to curb the growth of Sahra Choueifat as a “Shiite area,” the plan was an attempt to make it harder for developers to build housing for the poor there. The 2008 plan, according to one advocate, meant “less Hezbollah followers will afford apartments under the new zoning laws.”

The idea of using industrial or agricultural zoning in Lebanon to create buffer zones between fighting parties is not new. For example, an attempt at a national master plan in 1986, while the civil war was still raging, proposed two “regional parks” (an anomaly in Lebanon) conveniently located along the battle lines between opposing militias (Verdeil 2004). However, as a top-level planning official told me in 2010: “Do you really think the remaining six to seven industries constitute an industrial zone? Industrial zone in Sahra Choueifat is a synonym for Druze territory, and residential zone for the Shiite territory.” Between the industrial and the residential, Sahra Choueifat is now a patchwork of apartment buildings, in the vicinity of industries, next to one of the most active urban agricultural areas around Beirut. One consequence of the contested nature of the terrain is that it created environmental havoc. Every winter wastewater mixes with rainwater coming down from Choueifat's hills, carrying with it industrial waste and agricultural soil. This unhealthy mixture fills up the streets. Those who can afford to leave do so, but those

*The idea of using industrial or agricultural zoning in Lebanon to create buffer zones between fighting parties is not new*



who cannot be left behind, causing a new phase of displacement, this time along class lines.

## Transforming peripheries into frontiers

Peripheral spaces like Sahra Choueifat found themselves in 2008 to be the frontiers of the new round of sectarian conflict. Until then, Sahra Choueifat had been associated in the public mind with agricultural supply, the informality of Hayy el-Selloum, rural migrant workers, and industry. Yet since 2008 Sahra Choueifat has become a frontier of violence, fear, growth, and environmental degradation in local wars. The juxtaposition of peripheries of urban growth and frontiers of sectarian conflict today shapes the possibilities for housing for Beirut's poor and middle income residents. This association has also defined a politics of closure, segregation, borderlines, and a "tactics of anticipation" with regard to futures of violence (Pradeep 1998).

In anthropological and urban scholarship, peripheries and frontiers have played a significant role in the understanding of uneven geographies. The periphery has been a powerful concept whether in discussions of peripheries in the Global South or in general as an aspect of urban theory (Tsing 1993; Yiftachel 2000; Caldeira 2000; Roy 2009b; Watson, 2009; Miraftab 2009). Commonly, peripheries constitute the urban outskirts (Simone 2010). As such, they have been key to discussions of urban informality (Roy and AlSayyad 2004). They may also be sites for the relocation of "unwanted" populations standing in the way of a city's "development" (Ghannam 2002). Peripheries are constituted by social, economic, and political conditions and logics. The latter contribute to peripheries' exclusion but can also lead to the destabilization of the center (Simone 2010). Because of their exclusion, peripheries can often be imbued with hope, a "volatility that is permitted to go nowhere and a completion always yet to come" (Simone 2007:464). In peripheries, Holston wrote, "struggles . . . for the basic resources of daily life and shelter have also generated new movements of insurgent citizenship based on their claims to have a right to the city and a right to rights" (2009:245).

Frontiers are another powerful concept in anthropological and urban research. They are quite often discussed as dystopic spaces where regimes of power and capital are in the process of reconfiguring space in their own image. Frontiers are often thought of as spaces of capital accumulation and/or racial or ethnic domination. Smith (1996) examined how inner-city neighborhoods in American cities became urban frontiers where poor people are driven from their neighborhoods by forces of gentrification. In Israel, frontier settlements have allowed the expansion of control by a dominant group into adjacent areas, assisting "both in the construction of national-Jewish identity, and in capturing physical space on which this identity could be territorially constructed" (Yiftachel 2006:108). The elasticity of such a frontier, according to Weizman, allows it to "continually remold[s] itself to absorb and accommodate

opposition" (2007:173), diverting the debate around its existence to issues of inclusion and exclusion. Frontiers also shape the geographies of the "War on Terror," where distance has been mapped into difference. Gregory (2004) shows how, by transforming borders into frontiers, spaces in Baghdad or Kabul are constructed as "imaginative geographies," whose destruction is necessary for the safety of "the West." Frontiers are also spaces of uncertainty. In Gupta and Ferguson's account, borderlands as frontiers are a "place of incommensurable contradictions" and "an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject" (1992:18). Frontiers could also be "liminal zones of struggle, between different groups for power and influence—each seeking to expand their influence by shaping these zones on their own terms. In this view, the frontier is a fuzzy geographic space where outcomes are uncertain" (Leitner et al. 2007:311). Consistent with these analyses of peripheries as left-out, hopeful spaces and frontiers as impending, dystopic, and contested areas, how can the transformation of peripheries into frontiers, or more accurately their overlapping geographies, be understood in Beirut?

*Frontiers are  
spaces of  
uncertainty*

According to Simone, "the periphery can exist as a frontier in that it has a border with another city, nation, rural area, or periphery" (2010:40–41). As an area of overlap, the periphery is thus a hybrid space "where different ways of doing things, of thinking about and living urban life, can come together" (ibid). It is a space "that absorbs tensions inherent in the intersection of substantially different ways of doing things" (ibid). In this view, the periphery-as-frontier is a hopeful space. In this paper I illustrated that the transformation of peripheries into frontiers, or the coexistence of both in cities like Beirut, is possible only within a geography produced according to ongoing cycles of conflict and wars that are yet to come (Bou Akar 2012). The "war yet to come" is in many ways the antithesis of Simone's "city yet come." For Simone the "city is the conjunction of seemingly endless possibilities of remaking," where precarious structures, provisional locations, potholed roads "[e]ven in their supposedly depleted conditions, all are openings onto somewhere" (2004:9). However, the case of Sahra Choueifat shows that in cities in conflict, like Beirut, the mundane and liminal geographies of peripheries-turned-frontiers may be both hopeful and dystopic.

Low-income war-displaced families have been able to secure low-cost housing in Sahra Choueifat. This has allowed many of them to keep their jobs in the city. Nonetheless, the new spaces are also zones of conflict and contestation where fears of future local and regional wars shape everyday life. These are geographies that provide the possibility for some sort of "right to the city" (Mitchell 2003). But they are also spaces where the futures of violent engagements and displacements are drawn and redrawn every day. Concurrently as the periphery of urban growth and the frontier of sectarian and regional conflict, such spaces highlight how the practices of urban planning, the anticipation of new wars and violence, and the constructed spatiality of sectarian difference articulate Beirut's post-war geography.

Critical to the production of peripheries-as-frontiers are both the formal discourses and practices of urban planning and the spatial practices of religious-political organizations like Hezbollah and the PSP. The more such actors, like Hezbollah and the PSP, become engaged with the production of cities, the more it becomes important to investigate their role in producing urban space and the ensuing dynamics of urban politics, its ruptures and possibilities, contestations and transgression. This is particularly true with regard to cities divided along religious and ethnic lines, where the spatiality of constructed differences may affect decisions of inclusion and exclusion, peace and war. Skyrocketing land and housing prices have created pressures that shape these peripheries into contested frontiers. Yet these are the same peripheral areas that provide housing for middle- and low-income people who have been priced out of central Beirut. The “planning” of the present as illustrated in the case of Sahra Choueifat, therefore, is the result of layers of contestation over different lived pasts considering the imagined futures of local and regional wars yet to come. This is why Sahra Choueifat’s 1996 master plan, which was meant to be the blueprint for its development for the next 30 years, has been changed so many times.

Rather than understanding Beirut’s peripheries as an unmapped and unplanned geography (Roy 2002; Elyachar 2005), or in terms of possibilities yet to come (Simone 2004; Holston 2009), I showed how the geographies of Beirut’s peripheries-turned-frontiers are in fact “intricately planned” according to imagined present and future conflicts and growth. Thus, contested planning exercises in Sahra Choueifat produce patchworks of spaces where industrial and residential zones overlap, and towns include highways that were never finished, roads that were abolished, and playgrounds that were never built. Urban planning in Lebanon, with its practices, discourses, and contestations, transformed Beirut’s peripheries into contested frontiers characterized by environmental degradation and cycles of violence.

*Urban planning in Lebanon, with its practices, discourses, and contestations, transformed Beirut’s peripheries into contested frontiers characterized by environmental degradation and cycles of violence*

## Epilogue

Choueifat is one of many interface zones where the battle to spatially delineate political difference is raging in the greater Beirut area. What had until recently been a battle played out in the realm of everyday life, fought through land and housing markets, planning and zoning tools, recently emerged in the arena of national debate. In December 2010, lawmaker and Representative Boutros Harb submitted a controversial draft law that suggested prohibiting land sales between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon for a period of fifteen years (with the Druze included on the Muslim side). He said it was time to “bring out people’s anxieties and fears expressed in chats behind closed doors by openly addressing and formalizing them in a law that would put people’s minds to peace” (Interview on MTV 01/10/2011). By proposing to halt land sales and freeze what had provided a foundation for the Lebanese regime of property rights, Harb argued that his law was aimed

to preserve “religious co-existence.” Although it has so far remained only ink on paper, this law would be the ultimate spatial manifestation of the war yet to come. It is aimed at locking the city in the present because the future can only be imagined as bleak.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>On May 5, 2008, an amputated Lebanese government (after Hezbollah and its allies had left) announced that it had discovered a private, parallel telecommunication network operated by Hezbollah. It deemed the network illegal, and announced that it would be removed. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, called the government's decision a “declaration of war” against its resistance to Israeli occupation. He claimed the network was key to its success in the effort, and it was therefore Hezbollah's “moral duty” to use its arms to defend the network to keep Lebanon defended against occupation. On May 7, 2008, Hezbollah and its allies took over Beirut's streets, cordoning off the airport, the house of government, and the homes of major political leaders. Within a few hours, Hezbollah declared they were in full control of the city. Over the next five days the fighting moved to the city's peripheries and to mountain areas, where the battles were mostly fought between Hezbollah and the Druze PSP. The battles in the Sahra Choueifat and Choueifat were significant in these violent events, which came to be known as the “May 7 events.”

<sup>2</sup>The Druze are a minority religious group in Lebanon and the Middle East. Within the institutional make-up in Lebanon, they are considered an Islamic sect. Most of the post-war religious-political organizations were the sponsors of militias during the 1975–1990 civil war.

<sup>3</sup>By “formal” I mean that in Sahra Choueifat owners of most buildings obtained title deeds and building permits before commencing construction. This is in contrast to the neighboring informal settlement of Hayy el-Selloum. For a detailed discussion on the development of Hayy el-Selloum, see Fawaz (2004).

<sup>4</sup>I conducted the first phase of this research in 2004–2005 for my master's thesis on issues of war displacement and access to housing in post-war Beirut (Bou Akar, 2005). After the May 2008 violence, Sahra Choueifat was one of three sites where I examined the spatial production of Beirut's peripheries as frontiers within the planned geographies of possible future local and regional conflicts (Bou Akar 2012).

<sup>5</sup>During the war, Beirut was divided along a demarcation line, commonly known as the “Green Line,” into two parts: predominantly Muslim West Beirut and Christian East Beirut.

<sup>6</sup>Financing agreements took place between buyers and developers. Buyers provided developers with a down payment and signed monthly installment vouchers, known in colloquial Lebanese as *kimbyalet*. These monthly payments are basically mortgage payments paid directly to the developers.

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