

# **Nature, environmentalism, and the politics of citizenship in post-civil war**

## **Lebanon**

### **Introduction**

In 1985, in the midst of the Lebanese civil war, a young man named Bechara had a vision to overcome violent conflict by taking groups of children from different sectarian backgrounds to the country's mountainous hinterland for a two-week camp. The idea behind the camp, as Bechara<sup>1</sup> explained to us almost three decades later, was to remove young people from their increasingly 'ghettoized' existence and to mix them together in order to bring down 'the walls of prejudice' between them. He explained, 'We wanted to go against the war, so we needed to go against separation...We are all Lebanese. The idea was to make unity'. Nature was not incidental to Bechara's strategy; rather, he suggested, nature provided a context for unity and the calming of hostilities. This view has informed his activities up to the present day. Now the head of a full-fledged non-governmental organization (NGO) with support from the European Union, Bechara continues to gather together young people whenever conflict flares up (a frequent occurrence in Lebanon) and to send them to camp in the countryside, away from the deep-seated antagonisms and divisiveness of city neighborhoods.

Bechara is not alone in his regard for the curative properties of nature. For many civil-society actors, especially those affiliated with Western donor-funded NGOs, the remedy for Lebanon's political troubles resides at least partly with the natural environment and people's contact with it. Environmental preservation efforts and urban green-space advocacy, as well as the promotion of hiking, camping, scouting, and eco-tourism, have thus featured prominently in the NGO sector, forming the basis of Lebanon's contemporary environmentalist movement. In this paper, we explore the way environmental thought—much of it drawing on Western discourses linking environmental practice to individual and collective transformation—has been interwoven with a variety of political projects in Lebanon, starting with the formation of the Lebanese state as Christian homeland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our main focus is on the ways contemporary civil-society actors, especially Western-supported NGOs, deploy particular understandings of nature and green space in their attempts to reconstitute citizenship and to re-imagine Lebanon as a unified, multi-confessional nation-state. Civil-society actors, we show, idealize nature as providing a neutral space in which Lebanese from different confessional backgrounds can come together and develop a collective consciousness, and they use environmental practices as a means to develop new social norms built around ideas of empowerment, individual responsibility, and consensus. These understandings and uses of the environment are profoundly—and intentionally—depoliticizing, though we emphasize that 'politics' in the form of dissent and protest are present in Lebanon's environmental movement. Ultimately, however, the capacity for NGOs to transform Lebanese society through environmental activism and nature-oriented activities is limited both by the entanglement

of NGOs in sectarian politics and the involvement of sectarian groups in the environmental movement.

The following account draws on intensive, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2010 and 2011 and again between 2013 and 2014 in Lebanon. These interviews have been collected as part of a larger, multi-country project on youth citizenship initiatives in post-conflict societies; we have thus far collected interviews with representatives of 41 NGOs for the Lebanon component of this study. The project, we reiterate, does not focus on environmentalism, per se, but rather, on the aims and impacts of citizenship initiatives in our study sites. Yet themes relating to environment, nature, and green space surfaced repeatedly in our interviews, and many of the organizations we included in the study sponsor a variety of environmental activities, from beach clean-ups to open-space advocacy to camps and rural/eco tourism (as we explain below, many NGOs have multiple remits). Having observed the prominence of environmental activities in Lebanese civil society, we gathered further information about environmental thought and practice through interviews with urban planners and individual environmentalists, and through participation in eco-tourism activities. The following account describes the emergence of environmental discourse in Lebanon and explains how and why the environment, nature and green space have come to play a prominent role in recent efforts to develop citizenship and national identity. We begin with a more general overview of the ways in which nature and the environment have been implicated historically in the formulation of national identity and citizenship.

## **Nature and the production of nationhood and citizenship**

Geographers and environmental historians have long been interested in the production of 'nature' as a discrete entity separate from human society and as an object of governance, control, management, and commodification.<sup>2</sup> Here, we are concerned not so much with the actual governance of nature as with the ways in which discourses and practices around nature and environment 'become part of the implementation and contestation of particular social and political realities'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we are interested in the ways that social actors deploy ideas about and representations of nature and the environment toward certain social and political ends, and especially toward nation- and citizenship-building projects.

Scholars provide many examples of the ways in which ideas about nature and environmental practices have figured in the production of modern nationhood and citizenship in Western contexts. Scholarship on the romantic nationalisms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in particular, highlights the close association between political ideology, representations of nature, and environmental practice. As Kaufmann and Zimmer remark, the search for 'authentic' landscapes was integral to the 'search for national pedigrees', which 'had come to form the centrepiece of most European nationalisms and national identities' by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> The proliferation of hiking and nature preservation groups throughout Europe at this time indicated the ways in which Western thought

endowed nature with transformative capabilities. It was not simply that the natural landscape embodied national identity and national character, but that by going into nature, people would undergo personal and collective transformation. Hiking and camping, in the first instance, provided direct encounters with the sublime that would purify the individual soul while fostering collective emotional attachment to homeland and a bounded national community.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the development of an international scouting movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the popularization of summer camps, reflected a belief that being in nature would foster desired social values and orientations, produce useful and productive citizens (often articulated in highly gendered terms as ‘tough’ and self-sufficient), and generate patriotism and national/imperial greatness.<sup>6</sup>

The connections made between ‘a healthy youth, a salving nature, and a well-governed nation’<sup>7</sup> were present also in the urban park movement that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. Urban elites embraced environmental determinist thought, which held that ‘the character of society flowed from its surroundings’<sup>8</sup>. It was crucial, from this perspective, to beautify urban space and to expose urban dwellers to the moral uplift provided by nature. Nature and other forms of beauty provided no less than a moral order in industrial cities marred (in the eyes of middle-class ‘Progressive’ reformers) by crime, deviance, filth, social isolation, and corruption. Parks in many instances were designed and situated for accessibility, as it was through frequent use of the urban park that the working-class poor would develop civic virtues, thereby smoothing over deep class divisions present in turn-of-the-century urban

society. Maintaining this therapeutic, uplifting splendor in the midst of the city, however, required active policing and management of the physical landscape to exclude behaviors deemed immoral or incompatible with the 'natural' environment.<sup>9</sup>

Western environmentalism, of course, has moved on from late 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic nationalism and Progressivism. The growing body of literature advocating 'green citizenship' seems more inclined to advocate the wholesale transformation of modern citizenship—including notions of rights, civic responsibilities, and democratic participation—as a means of encouraging more ecologically centered societies, than to treat the environment itself as a wellspring of citizenship values and norms.<sup>10</sup> But established modes of environmental determinism, which understand the environment and environmental practices to shape society and to produce ideal citizens, very much persist in contemporary environmentalism, as seen with the growing advocacy surrounding community gardens and urban farming. Mary Beth Pudup<sup>11</sup> argues that the community garden movement has gradually transitioned from a countermovement against consumerism and corporate power in the 1970s to an instrument of neoliberal governmentality promoted by the non-profit sector, the goal of which is to promote the personal changes in attitude and behavior supposedly necessary to overcome social marginalization. Community gardening, in other words, 'puts individuals in charge of their own adjustment(s) to economic restructuring and social dislocation through self-help technologies centered on personal contact with nature'.<sup>12</sup> This and many other examples of environmental and green space activism indicate the ways in which the environment—both cultivated and

‘wild’—continues to function as a moral landscape that represents and generates societal virtues and that must therefore be purged of inappropriate uses and behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

These ways of thinking about the environment, nationhood, and citizenship, as our examples have indicated, are very much tied to Western contexts. But they have also exerted a significant influence in post-colonial societies across long histories of interaction with Western missionaries, educators, merchants, occupying forces, and development agencies. The influence of Western environmental thought and practice in post-colonial contexts has been complex and not entirely straightforward. On the one hand, Western environmentalism has served the purposes of colonial and post-colonial domination in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, environmentalist discourse (certainly not all of it imported from the West) has been used for anti-colonial resistance and in struggles against the post-colonial developmentalist state, which has typically emphasized the intensive exploitation of natural resources.<sup>15</sup> Amidst these instances of domination and resistance have been perhaps more ambiguous cases in which local elites have mobilized environmental discourse and practice within post-colonial nation-building projects and in broader efforts to produce ‘modern’ citizens. In the case of Lebanon, generations of environmentalists in Lebanon have drawn upon Western (and increasingly internationalized) environmental discourses, with their multifarious connections to ideas of citizenship and nationhood, to fashion particular political orders, or to challenge existing ones. In the following sections, we ask, how have ideas about nature and citizenship become meaningful in the post-civil war Lebanese context? What purpose do these ideas

serve in configuring new political realities? And what possibilities do they hold for effecting meaningful political transformations? To start, we explore how ideas about nature and the environment have been woven into the country's fractious political history.

### **Lebanese environmental thought and sectarianism in historical context**

Lebanon was carved out of the Ottoman province of Syria after World War I by French mandate rulers at the behest of the region's Maronite Christians, an Eastern-rite sect that had been in communion with the Roman Catholic Church since the 13<sup>th</sup> century and that had enjoyed significant political autonomy in Mount Lebanon since the 1860s thanks to European intervention. The very idea of Lebanon, in this respect, from the start was associated almost exclusively with Maronite political ideology<sup>16</sup> As with their counterparts in Europe, nationalist elites in Lebanon wove themes of nature and landscape into their narratives of national origins and uniqueness. At this time, Mount Lebanon's cedar trees, which feature prominently in the Bible, became an important, and rather loaded, symbol of Lebanese national identity. As Karim Makdisi notes, the cedar's relevance lay in connecting the nascent Lebanese state to ancient, pre-Islamic Lebanon; using the symbol of the cedars, in other words, Maronite elites distinguished Mount Lebanon and the Maronite community from the rest of Arab region and justified the formation of a country separate from Syria, whose predominantly Muslim population was more inclined to rally behind Arab and/or Syrian nationalism<sup>17</sup> Adding to this charged symbolism, the image of the cedar was



originally placed on the French tricolor, signaling Maronite elites' close affiliation with the French colonial administration.

While the creation of Lebanon was largely a matter of Maronite political will, the country's elites—Sunni, Shi'a, Druze, and Christian— accepted Lebanese independence as a practical matter and achieved a measure of accommodation amongst themselves by dividing key political posts and electoral seats between the country's main confessional groups.<sup>18</sup>

Christian, Muslim, and Druze elites in the post-independence period embraced and carried forward the environmental consciousness that had emerged during the French Mandate, weaving ideas about nature into their particular political programs and philosophies. Most notable was Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze community who had been educated in French-Catholic school in Lebanon and later at the Sorbonne. Jumblatt was a committed leftist whose almost mystical regard for nature, and his concern with the growing distance between humanity and nature, were incorporated into his progressive ideology. He created the Lebanese League for Bird Preservation to combat over-hunting, and he reportedly scattered the seeds of cedar trees in the Shouf region, which is today the site of a biosphere reserve controlled by the Jumblatt family (we return to this in the conclusion). During the post-independence period, as well, the country's Maronite president and Sunni prime minister 'celebrated the importance of nature' with the 'Eid al Shajara', or Tree Day, and the country experienced the expansion of scouting movement, which had first made an appearance during the late Ottoman period.<sup>19</sup>

The 1960s saw a new kind of environmentalism emerging in Lebanon, one tied less to sectarian elites than to civil society, which was expanding in Lebanon at this time in part due to the inflow of donor funds. This environmentalism was led by Western-educated professionals fluent in international norms. A key figure in the Lebanese environmental movement was Ricardus Haber, a botanist at the American University of Beirut, who had been a Boy Scout in his home region of the Shouf and who was influenced by Scouts founder Robert Baden-Powell and American naturalist John Muir. Haber created one of the first explicitly environmental NGOs in Lebanon in 1972, called the Friends of Nature,<sup>20</sup> which spoke out against the country's unbridled urban development and its seeming immunity to urban planning.<sup>21</sup> In their efforts to protect Lebanon's natural environment from the degradation caused by urban sprawl, Ricardus Haber and Friends of Nature have been described as scrupulously non-political. But the kind of activism Haber espoused in the 1970s (and continues to espouse) was not so much non-political or apolitical as it was reflective of a kind of politics built upon accommodation with the sectarian status quo. Haber's main interest, in other words, was not to enact political transformation but to build consensus and a common identity, given the existing political reality, around Lebanon's natural patrimony.<sup>22</sup> This was, as Karim Makdisi notes, a very different kind of environmental politics than that which emerged among Lebanon's impoverished, rural Shi'a communities in the 1960s, which focused on unequal access to water, land, and other natural resources.<sup>23</sup>

Lebanon's environmentalist movement was hampered by the outbreak of civil war in 1975, following years of discontent with the Maronites' tight grip on political power.<sup>24</sup> The war saw the mobilization of militias organized primarily along sectarian lines, each holding conflicting understandings of Lebanon's national identity and its relationship to the Arab world. The war was devastating both socially and environmentally. Militia control over urban and national space—maintained through checkpoints and barriers-- signaled growing polarization and isolation among the Lebanese population. Downtown Beirut, long celebrated for its cosmopolitanism, was gutted, and the city's residents retreated behind sectarian lines, with many Christians fleeing to newly built suburbs stretching north from the capital. With the collapse of public services, limited in scope even before the war, Lebanon faced environmental devastation through deforestation and the dumping of garbage and untreated sewage (Lebanon also became a dumping ground for toxic chemicals from Europe).

The post-civil war Lebanese state—which remains factionalized along sectarian lines—has been able to accomplish little in the way of (re)building public services, controlling development, or dealing with environmental problems in any kind of consistent or centralized fashion.<sup>25</sup> Into this situation (not so much a power void as a fragmented system of patron-client networks) has stepped a resurgent civil society consisting of NGOs, whose growth has been fuelled by Western largesse.<sup>26</sup> As in the pre-civil war period, NGOs have become the standard-bearers of environmentalism. NGOs involved in environmental activities continue to describe their work as 'apolitical' or non-political, but it is hard to

ignore the ways in which environmental discourse and practice has become intertwined with a broader set of goals relating to the production of a new societal order. Few NGOs are dedicated exclusively to the preservation of nature for its own sake. Instead, most NGOs who run environmental and green-space programs are addressing a suite of issues, including women's empowerment, youth empowerment, local economic development, leadership training, and/or democratic participation. These multipurpose NGOs are explicit in their intent to transform Lebanese society and to form new kinds of citizens armed with skills in consensus building, conflict resolution, and self-empowerment. These citizens, in turn, will have the capacity to create a new, political reality in the country in which the authority of sectarian leaders, or *za'im*, will be (ideally) greatly diminished.

In the following discussion, we explore how NGOs, drawing on internationalized discourses of environment and citizenship, are mobilizing ideas about nature and green space in their efforts to create new Lebanese citizens. Our discussion concludes by considering the ways in which these efforts are limited both by the continued prominence of sectarian leaders, who themselves have used environmentalism for their own political gain, and by NGOs' associations with Western donors, whose politics implicate them in the very sectarian system they wish to undermine.

### **Environmental activism and civil society organizations in post-civil war Lebanon**

The end of the civil war saw a remarkable upsurge of environmental activism in Lebanon dedicated to nature protection and rural preservation, the promotion of hiking and camping, especially for youth, and advocacy for publicly accessible green spaces in cities. As in the pre-civil war period, the Friends of Nature—which reportedly had 3,000 members by the early 1990s—had an important role in leading environmental initiatives after the civil war. Ricardus Haber himself was instrumental in creating two nature reserves in the 1990s—the Horsh Ehden Preserve in the mountainous Zghora region in northern Lebanon, and the Palm Island reserve off the coast of Tripoli. Another important initiative has been the Lebanese Mountain Trail (LMT), a project conceived by Joseph Karam, who was inspired by the Appalachian Trail during his years living in the U.S. The LMT, which is today nearly 230 miles long, has been given over \$3 million of USAID funding as part of a program to support rural tourism and economic development. It is used extensively by ecotourism groups like Vamos Todos and Cyclamen, who are committed to environmental and cultural preservation and the promotion of rural tourism. Yet another high-profile environmental NGO is the Association for Forest Development and Conservation (AFDC), which like the LMT, has received substantial support from Western aid agencies, including USAID. This organization was founded following a devastating forest fire near the village of Ramlieh and began as a tree-nursery and reforestation program before branching into rural tourism and rural hostels. A final example is an organization called Green Line, a name that makes ironic reference to the desolate no-man’s-land that separated Christian East Beirut and Muslim West Beirut during the civil war. This organization was founded in 1991 by professors and students from the American University of Beirut who—in the words of the organization’s

promotional material—‘decided to translate their concern about the post-war devastated cultural, human and natural environment into an organized action [to] expose environmental threats; to popularize environmental awareness; and to contribute towards a scientific framework for a sustainable environmental management policy’. The organization today is funded by numerous American and European agencies and advocates clean energy policy, organic farming, eco-tourism, school gardens, and a variety of other initiatives.

For all of these organizations and others like them, nature and wilderness, as well as urban green space and the cultivated rural environment, are important not only for their own sake but because they offer a means by which Lebanon might achieve unity and overcome sectarian divisions. The LMT website, for instance, describes the trail as not only showcasing Lebanon’s natural beauty and cultural heritage, but also as ‘bringing communities closer together’ while expanding economic opportunities in rural areas.

AFDC, likewise, holds ‘green leadership’ programs at its rural hostels with the idea that young people will more easily find common ground if they are removed from the divisive environment of sectarian neighborhoods and are exposed to the essential Lebaneseness of rural life. There is, then, a great deal of faith placed in nature and the environment to transform the ways that Lebanese people (and especially Lebanese youth) understand and perform societal membership.

These NGOs, it must be noted, are working with very specific understandings of citizenship that, far from unique to the Lebanese context, are pervasive among Western-funded NGOs in post-conflict and divided societies (and in the West itself). NGO workers whom we interviewed—many of them educated in the West or at English- or French-language institutions—explained citizenship in several interrelated ways: as individuals' contribution to collective well-being; as community and individual 'empowerment' and engagement in order to overcome obstacles to well-being and development; and as the ability to speak across difference and to achieve consensus.<sup>27</sup> Nature and green space are seen to be instrumental in enacting this kind of citizenship in several ways, some of them indicated in the examples above. The environment, for instance, provides people with opportunities, especially in poor rural regions, to take responsibility for their own social and economic well-being through ecotourism and organic farming. Lebanon's sublime natural and rural landscapes, as well, become a means of creating emotional attachments between Lebanese people and the land (here we see echoes of 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic nationalism), thereby building a stronger commitment toward Lebanon as a place and as an idea. Nature also provides a 'neutral' physical space, presumably distinct from sectarian space, in which individuals can leave behind narrow confessional affiliations and perform Lebaneseness by partaking in camping, hiking, and rural-heritage activities or in activities that benefit the country as a whole (such as beach clean-up efforts, a popular activity among environmental groups). It is a space, in other words, in which otherwise dissociated actors learn to be citizens through activities and opportunities for engagement, interaction, and dialogue. As one of our interviewees explained,

The environment unites us because it affects us equally...[We do activities] up in the mountains [because] we want to encourage [youth] to give back, and this giving back is translated into environmental projects—into creating environmental clubs or re-planting projects. It's a good introduction to the idea of giving back. The environment is not politicized, though in some ways, it does get politicized, as we see with illegal quarries in Lebanon that are often owned by politicians. But still the environment is a method to bring people together.

Further to this point, some of our interviews described the way in which lack of exposure to nature and open space had had deleterious effects on the Lebanese, exacerbating existing social divisions and making it impossible for people—and especially young people—to interact with others in a peaceful manner. Creating green space, then, is about creating venues in which social divisions and tensions can be diminished, and in which people learn to be at ease with each other. Thus, Ahmed<sup>28</sup>, another interviewee involved in green-space activism in Beirut, states,

Look, children need to play. It's the way they develop their personality. Now, if you're children want to play, where do they play?...In the Lebanese mentality, the street is for the bad people, so they can't go to the street. So where can they go then? They stay in the house, which



means you can't express yourself. You're shut up. And this leads for sure to violence, drugs. If we don't express ourselves, especially with the tension from the war...If we can't play, then we can't express, we can't release the tension inside of us. Where is the tension going?

Ahmed has long championed the re-opening of the Beirut Pine Forest (Horsh Beirut), one of the city's few remaining green spaces, and one that has shrunk dramatically in the past few decades due to development. The park was reportedly used as a dumping ground for bodies during the civil war, and many of the trees were destroyed during the war for use as fuel. After the war, the French government sponsored reforestation efforts, but the park has remained mostly inaccessible to the public, except for occasional, planned festivals. This individual and his organization, along with individual activists affiliated with other NGOs and universities, have sponsored various events and campaigns aimed at opening the park to the public. Significantly, this activism is conducted alongside (Western-funded) youth dialogue and leadership activities—in other words, mobilization around the park is a means of training young people to interact peacefully and to empower themselves and their communities. The open space itself, if and when it is ever opened to the public, will be the physical space in which inter-sectarian community-building will take place. Ahmed states,

We want cultural exchange between our people; we want Horsh Beirut to be a daily cultural exchange. People will start to communicate, start to understand

each other...We'll have less violence. We'll have a feeling of belonging more. We will raise more and more the feeling of understanding. And then the one in the Sunni area will go to the Christian area because he has friends there...and then they will start to feel they are one country. This is what we believe in. I don't know if it will happen [laughs]. But we need to try. We have nothing else!

The idea of green space as a means of fostering dialogue and inter-communal harmony is also articulated by Zeina, a British-educated urban planner who has single-handedly been promoting the ecological restoration of the old Beirut rail yard. For Zeina, the rehabilitation of the rail yard and the creation of publicly-accessible green space would signify the reunification of Beirut, and by extension, Lebanese society, after the dislocation and polarization of the civil war. She states:

The civil war fragmented the city, and there was no center for 15 years. There were little centers in different neighborhoods that were dominated by militias and sectarian political leaders. Martyr's Square, which had served as an important central point since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, lost its function. This was a place where people from all backgrounds met. There were cinemas and theaters close by, and it connected to the souqs and the waterfront...When it ceased to exist during the civil war...streets

became very hostile places and there were few spaces in which people could interact with each other.

Zeina notes that there *are* a few open spaces where people are able to mix and interact in Beirut, including the Corniche, a paved promenade that runs along the seafront. But she is insistent on the specific value of *green* public space: without green space in the city, people rely on cars; they don't walk anywhere, they don't encounter other people face-to-face, and the whole situation creates stress, pollution, and strains on mental health. 'People', she argues,

are very disconnected from nature, and historically, we were always close to nature. I would like to reintroduce wilderness into the city, in old, derelict industrial areas...Green spaces don't need to be manicured...just something green.

The old rail yard is especially appropriate to her mission, she suggests, not only because of the ecological lushness of the space, but because of the possibility the space offers for coming to terms with the torture and violence that took place there during the civil war. This gruesome history, she argues, should not be covered, but should be part of the story of the rail yard and a means of fostering healing and open discussion about the war, in contrast to what some Lebanese commentators have called Lebanon's post-war 'collective amnesia'.<sup>29</sup>

A final example of the ways in which activists put their faith in nature and green space as means of effecting societal transformation is Amal, whose life as a green-space activist began with a public intervention on World Environment Day that involved putting small squares of turf around Beirut with a sign reading 'Enjoy your green space'. This intervention, of course, was an ironic gesture intended to raise awareness among Beirutis of their lack of green space. In a subsequent, bolder gesture, Amal, along with fellow activists, transformed a densely built area in central Beirut into a temporary green space and park using sod.<sup>30</sup> For Amal, as for the other interviewees, the importance of green space relates to the need to defuse societal tensions—to create a peaceful environment in which people can interact and set aside differences. Speaking of her days as a student in Paris, she states,

It was part of my daily routine to sit in parks and have my coffee there...It was part of my life, and then when I moved back here—I always lived in Beirut, but I wasn't very sensitive about the subject before...I was like, wow, I really miss this. It's very important to have space in a city...You get aware once you see how important it is in other cities; how relaxed people are in parks, and how there is this exchange between people that's non-existent here.

Like other interviewees, she cites the importance of green spaces for reducing pollution, for improving mental health and stress levels. 'Imagine', she states, 'if you have the space to let out your anger'. Like other interviewees, as well, she recognizes the need to change the middle-class Lebanese mindset that being in a publicly accessible green space or garden is somehow disreputable. Creating parks for Amal is about creating attractive public spaces, encouraging people from different backgrounds to go to them, and creating a new collective consciousness.

In advocating for spaces of interaction and dialogue, and in fostering a sense of common identity and common purpose around and through environmental and green-space preservation, the activists are (from their perspective) producing a new form of politics that stands in stark contrast to the status quo of sectarian discord and divisiveness. Nature and green space, they suggest, is a remedy for corrosive sectarianism, making possible a kind of 'depoliticized politics' centered on interaction, dialogue, and community-building; and it is a realm in which Lebanese can perform modern citizenship built upon notions of active engagement and meaningful, pragmatic improvement to quality of life. This kind of politics, as described earlier, is closely associated with Western donor-funded NGOs in many post-conflict societies, and critics have often charged that the depoliticized understanding of citizenship and participation offered by NGOs serves mainly as an instrument of neo-liberal governance that closes off more radical forms of dissent and protest.<sup>31</sup> However, as attached as they are to notions of consensus and inter-communal harmony, our interviews are not necessarily averse to more contentious forms of politics.

Their clear commitment to depoliticized modes of societal membership, in other words, is tempered by their actual political practices and consciousness.

To illustrate, embedded in many of the comments of our interviewees were running critiques of the key actors who dominate urban development in Lebanon—sectarian political leaders and real estate developers, who are often one and the same. In advocating green space and environmental preservation, they are not only seeking ‘community’, but they (like environmentalists in the 1960s) are also protesting against the utter lack of public control over land- and natural resource use, especially in Beirut, and the extreme prioritization of exchange values over use values. Interviewees reserve particular vitriol for the redeveloped downtown of Beirut, which has been managed by a public-private corporation called Solidere since the end of the civil war.<sup>32</sup> The Solidere district was touted as a model of ‘smart’ urban design, with preserved Ottoman-era facades, pedestrianized streets, and landscaped waterfront boulevards. But it has been widely criticized by scholars, activists, and ordinary people for being inaccessible even to the middle class, much less the poor, and as having torn out the soul of the city, and hence, the country itself.<sup>33</sup> Amal, for instance, after insisting that she is non-political, changes tack, stating,

The lack of green space is a political issue. I’m not saying I’m against any group, but look at downtown. Downtown is supposed to be public to everyone. What the hell? [laughs] It’s supposed to be a public space. Okay, I know a private company took it to reconstruct it...[but] this is not how you do it. The downtown

of a city is not this way. You don't just wipe away all the history and the character of a city this way. It was really wiped out in a way. Things in this country are not done with the right attitude...There's no emphasis on citizenship or the social issues, what people really want.

She follows this by describing citizenship as having rights to public green spaces, as well as to public libraries and other public services, and as having a role in determining the contours of city life. Later, she describes her personal blog in which she posts pictures of the city; in one of her postings, she included photographs of the massive luxury apartment towers that are ubiquitous in the downtown area, pointing out how many of them, ironically, include the word 'gardens' in their name. Her critique centers not only on the obliteration of Beirut's historic gardens and villas, but also the lack of affordability of the housing being built. Gradually and perhaps haltingly, she has found herself thinking about taking a more overtly political stance with her green-space activities:

A lot of people at the event on Saturday [when they covered a paved area in turf] were like, wow, let's just close it and let's be more...I'm not going to say violent because it sounds wrong, and our whole intervention is a very pacifist intervention. But they were like, 'Let's go and picnic in front of Horsh Beirut', for example. A lot of people said it like, 'Let's go and be a bit more aggressive in our attitude'.

Ahmed has been more willing to confront powerful urban interests in the effort to secure green space. He was instrumental, for instance, in stopping the conversion of the Sanaya Gardens, one of the few publicly accessible gardens remaining in the city, into a parking lot by municipal interests who had an obvious financial stake in the deal.<sup>34</sup> Referring to these officials, he states, heatedly, ‘They don’t do anything for people. They just do things to take money. All the municipalities—not only Beirut. All of them. What gains money, they do it’. He continues by connecting the unwillingness of municipal officials to open Horsh Beirut to the redevelopment of downtown Beirut by Solidere and its powerful allies in the French government. He states,

Look at Beirut’s downtown now. They rebuilt it, but to me, they build our country with no soul.....All of our memories were destroyed. So if we have no memory, we have no future, we have no personality, we have no character. So that’s why we are also saying the Horsh Beirut is a historical place. And they say, ‘We don’t want to open Horsh Beirut because people will destroy it...Actually, I believe that the main reason they don’t want to open Horsh Beirut is because if they want to open something, they have to get money.

Facing the endless stonewalling by municipal officials, Ahmed took action:

I told the municipality of Beirut, ‘You made an agreement, and I want to see the agreement’. They say, ‘You can’t see the agreement’... So they can do whatever



they want in the government, the parliament, and the municipality. And I can know nothing about what's going on. I have nothing. So, I have to steal documents to build my case. And this is what happened to build the legal file. You have to steal things. You have to ask NGOs, 'Did you have an agreement with Beirut municipality? Can I take it from you? You take it from the NGO in a secret way. And the agreement usually mentions other agreements...

Stealing documents does not exactly exemplify the kind of radical democratic politics espoused by political theorists; still it is important to note that NGOs, despite their commitment to depoliticized forms of citizenship practice, are not entirely cowed by powerful interests, and that they do practice various forms of dissent that serve to undermine existing forms of authority. The lingering question, however, is, to what extent are these activists able to effect the societal transformations they wish to make? To what degree have they reconfigured citizenship in Lebanon or created a collective identity around Lebanon's natural environment and rural heritage? In our concluding thoughts, we examine some of the limits of environmental advocacy in creating a new political order in Lebanon.

### **Conclusion: A new political reality?**

Western-funded NGOs have a ubiquitous presence in Lebanon—there are hundreds of organizations in Lebanon today, most of them centered in Beirut but with remits to serve

different regions in the country. Through these organizations thousands of Lebanese people –especially young people, who are often the target of donor and NGO activities-- throughout the country have been exposed to internationalized discourses about citizenship and the environment through their participation in camping, scouting, eco-tourism, leadership training programs, school curricula, local preservation initiatives, and the like. But it is difficult to ascertain exactly how people interpret, understand, and act upon these environmental and citizenship discourses. NGOs, we have observed in our fieldwork, while wishing to reach out to the population at large, have a tendency to cultivate relatively small numbers of young people who become well versed in international norms but whose relationship with other Lebanese who have less exposure to international discourses seems somewhat tenuous. It is therefore not clear whether the environment is an effective instrument in generating desired transformations (our on-going research attempts to address this question).

The unknown but undoubtedly uneven reach of NGOs and their philosophies can be connected to a deeper set of problems that face NGOs and environmental activists. First, while NGOs aim to dislodge Lebanon's sectarian political system in Lebanon, they are, in fact, implicated in this system by virtue of their associations with Western donors. We hesitate to describe NGOs as the servants of Western geopolitical interests, yet it is the case that Western donors regard support for NGOs as a means of achieving their geopolitical aims in the region and that NGOs often tailor their activities to satisfy donor aims.<sup>35</sup> In the case of Lebanon, Western donors have supported NGOs in order to counter

the influence of Hizbullah, a large, militant Shi'a organization that is allied with Iran. By 'saving' Lebanon from its own divisive tendencies, Western donors aim to create a stable and reliable 'partner' in the Middle East that can resist Iran's influence. Those NGOs who accept funds from large U.S. donor agencies like USAID or the Middle East Partnership Initiative are forbidden to deal in any way with Hizbullah, which closes them off to a large segment of the Shi'a population while simultaneously making them party to current struggles between Shi'a and Sunni populations. NGOs, then, far from transcending the sectarian politics, are very much part of it—a point that many of our interviewees recognize and seek to rectify by finding non-U.S. funding streams.

Second, sectarian leaders themselves have picked up on many of the same themes espoused by NGOs, using environmentalism toward their own ends—not least to provide a veneer of legitimacy to their real-estate dealings. Paul Kingston<sup>36</sup> remarks that Lebanon's sectarian elites have been 'very effective in coopting, fragmenting, and narrowing the scope of environmental activity in post-civil war Lebanon' by exercising monopolies over environmental activities in their areas. By participating in umbrella organizations like the Lebanese Environmental Forum (LEF), sectarian leaders have been able to sideline more independently minded NGOs and to dilute the demands of environmentalists relating to development. Moreover, they have used the LEF to channel donor funds to protected areas under their control. In fairness, some elements of this sectarian elite—like the Jumblatt family (mentioned earlier)—have been more sincere in their support of environmentalism. Kingston suggests that under the leadership of a Jumblatt ally in late

1990s, the newly created Ministry of the Environment enjoyed the support of NGOs and independent environmentalists. Yet the Jumblatt family, like other elite families, uses forest and nature reserves in its Shouf stronghold as a means of exercising local political control and distributing patronage.

We need, then, to recognize the gap between what NGOs envision in terms of the environment and citizenship, and what they are able to achieve and implement. NGOs treat nature and green space as an antidote to sectarianism and as an instrument for creating the social encounters and interactions that will produce social cohesion in a country that has been marred by near-constant instability since its inception. As well, they view environmental practices—whether eco-tourism, organic agriculture, or beach clean-ups—as producing new modes of active citizenship and new kinds of self-sustaining, self-governing, empowered citizens and communities. But the political scene in Lebanon today remains highly divided, with sectarian-based patron-client exerting significant influence over people’s lives and their experiences of social membership. Still, NGOs and environmentalism are leaving an imprint on Lebanese society—some segments of it perhaps more so than others. Through the workings of NGOs, certain ways of talking about citizenship, national belonging, and nature have become relatively commonplace, if not universally accepted. What becomes important in this context is to understand how environmentalist discourse is mobilized by different political actors toward not one, but multiple political projects, and how ideas of nature are incorporated into competing systems of political authority and power.

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this article are pseudonyms. To protect the anonymity of our interviewees, we do not name the organizations with which they are affiliated.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto, Between the Lines, 1991); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1992); Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, Third Edition (Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Kenny Cupers, 'Governing Through Nature: Camps and Youth Movements in Interwar Germany and the United States', *Cultural Geographies*, 15, pp. 173-205.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Kaufmann and Oliver Zimmer, 'In Search of the Authentic Nation: Landscape and National Identity in Canada and Switzerland', *Nations and Nationalism* 4 (1998), pp. 483-510. See also . Joan Nogué and Joan Vicente, 'Landscape and National Identity in Catalonia', *Political Geography* 23 (2004), pp. 113-132; Thomas Lekan, 'Regionalism and the Politics of Landscape Preservation in the Third Reich', *Environmental History* 4 (1999), pp. 384-404. Lekan's account of 19<sup>th</sup> century German environmentalism illustrates well how natural features became 'potent symbols of the subjective feelings and community loyalties attached to *Heimat*' and how environmental preservation became a measure of patriotism. Numerous hiking groups and local environmental and historical preservation groups emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, driven by the belief that Germany's primordial essence could be found in the landscape

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<sup>5</sup> Kaufmann and Zimmer, 'Authentic Nation'.

<sup>6</sup> Cupers, 'Governing Through Nature'. . Cupers shows that youth camps in Nazi Germany aimed to imprint young men with a collective sense of duty toward the German nation, while camps in the United States emphasized the building of individual character and individual self-sufficiency. In the latter case, imagined Native-American practices served as a respite from the ills of modern urban life while conveying a sense of American distinctiveness linked to the frontier and wilderness. See also Sarah Mills, ' "An Instruction in Good Citizenship": Scouting and the Historical Geographies of Citizenship Education', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013), pp. 120-134.

<sup>7</sup> Cupers, 'Governing Through Nature', p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Terence Young, 'Social Reform Through Parks: The American Civic Association's Program for a Better America, *Journal of Historical Geography* 22 (1996), pp. 460-472.

<sup>9</sup> The history of parks in Europe and the United States was fraught with class tensions and class conflict, as different groups—the affluent, the middle-class, and working class people—all sought to use and to shape park space as they saw fit. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, urban progressives had an increasingly important role in imagining the park as a public venture and as a source of moral and social improvement for working-class people. Some argued further that urban green space, by relieving stress and psychological tension and by providing more wholesome diversion than the saloon or the dancehall, would make workers and industry more productive. Working-class people, however, did not always submit to middle-class norms, leading to constant debates about appropriate uses of park space and the meaning of 'public' space. For further discussion about the class politics surrounding parks, see Nate Gabriel, 'The Work That Parks Do: Towards an

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Urban Environmentalism', *Social and Cultural Geography* 12 (2011), pp. 123-144, and Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1992)

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of contemporary modes of environmental citizenship, see Teena Gabrielson, 'Green Citizenship: A Review and Critique', *Citizenship Studies* 12( 2008), pp. 429-446. For an example of the ways in which scholars are articulating 'green citizenship', see Michael F. Maniates, 'Individualization: Plant a tree, buy a bike, save the world?' *Global Environmental Politics* 1 (2001), pp. 31-52.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Beth Pudup, 'It Takes a Garden: Cultivating Citizen-Subjects in Organized Garden Projects', *Geoforum* 39 (2008), pp. 1228-1240.

<sup>12</sup> Pudup, 'It Takes a Garden', p. 1228. We wish to point out that while often associated with neoliberalism, the production of self-regulating, self-governing subjects has a much longer history. As described earlier, the formation of self-disciplined citizens has been a central aim of scouting movements since their inception in the early 20th century. See Mills, 'An Instruction in Good Citizenship'.

<sup>13</sup> Setten provides an interesting account of competing moralities of a cultivated landscape, and the tendency of environmentalists and planners to impose idealized notions of ecological protection and rural preservation onto rural residents. See Gunhild Setten, *The habitus, the Rule, and the Moral Landscape*, *Cultural Geographies* 11 (2004): 389-415.

<sup>14</sup> Thaddeus Sunseri, for instance, describes how German colonial rulers in Tanzania imposed their forestry practices, which had developed around concerns with the depletion

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of forests due to industrialization, through the creation of forest reserves. These reserves effectively blocked off local people's access to crucial natural resources used for subsistence and trade, while facilitating German extraction of local resources. In the post-colonial era, forest reserves continued to operate under the assumption that the use of forest resources for subsistence purposes or for economic gain was inherently destructive. Thaddeus Sunseri, 'Reinterpreting a colonial rebellion: forestry and social control in German East Africa, 1874-1915', *Environmental History* (2003) pp. 430-451.

<sup>15</sup> Guha and Alier emphasize, in the case of India, that the 'vocabulary of protest' used by struggles against environmental exploitation have drawn on a combination of Western theories of civil disobedience and much older traditions of peasant resistance against colonial and post-colonial elites in India itself. Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (New York, Routledge, 2013). See also Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, 'Ecological conflicts and the environmental movement in India', *Development and Change* 25 (1994), pp. 101-136.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions* (Berkeley; Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Karim Makdisi, 'The rise and decline of environmentalism in Lebanon', in Alan Mikhail (ed) *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 207-230.

<sup>18</sup> The key, unwritten agreement that enshrined a sectarian political structure was the 'National Pact', which was brokered by Muslim and Christian elites in 1943. For a detailed discussion, see Salibi, *House of Many Mansions*, p. 185-187.

<sup>19</sup> Makdisi, 'Rise and Decline', pp. 215-216.



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<sup>20</sup> Makdisi, 'Rise and Decline', p. 217.

<sup>21</sup> The modernizing, technocratic regime of Fuad Chehab sought to restrain laissez-faire urban development practices. Under Chehab's administration, the French planner Michel Ecochard proposed a poly-centric urban structure to be organized around green spaces and green belts in order to relieve pressure on forested hills and beaches around Beirut. These planning efforts had little effect. Through the early 1970s, the flow of capital into the country from the Gulf stimulated intense land speculation and real estate development. At the same time, high levels of rural-to-urban migration—the product of the state's neglect of the agricultural sector, especially in the Shi'a-dominated south—added to urban sprawl and environmental degradation. Jad Tabet, 'Toward a Master Plan for Post-war Lebanon' in S. Khalaf and P.S. Khoury (eds.), *Recovering Beirut: Urban Design and Post-war Reconstruction* (Leiden, Brill, 1993), pp. 81-100. For an account of the formation of Beirut's southern suburbs, see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press), pp. 42-97.

<sup>22</sup> Haber's approach was evident in his efforts during the civil war to protect what remained of Lebanon's ancient cedars by negotiating with Suleiman Frangieh, a former president and a key Maronite militia figure in the Zgharta region. This episode is described in the hagiographic website dedicated to Haber's activism and philosophy of nature: [http://www.ricardushaber.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=43](http://www.ricardushaber.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=43)

<sup>23</sup> The most prominent Shi'a social justice movement was the 'Movement of the Deprived', led by Imam Musa al-Sadr. Makdisi, 'Rise and Decline', p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> The situation was further destabilized by the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose presence in Lebanon was very divisive and contributed to the rift between Muslims and Christians.

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<sup>25</sup> Lebanon's post-war political leaders (many of them former militia leaders) expressed their commitment to a non-sectarian political system as the only means of achieving lasting peace. But the peace agreement forged after the war largely maintained the pre-civil war political order, albeit with a shift in the balance of power away from Christians. Today, government offices and jobs continue to be allocated along sectarian lines, and the government has lurched from crisis to crisis as different factions have taken sides in regional conflicts and disputes (e.g. the Syrian civil war).

<sup>26</sup> This reflects a much broader trend of Western-financed NGO development in post-conflict settings around the world, and the colonization of civil society by NGOs. See, for instance, Alex Jeffrey, 'The geopolitical framing of localized struggles: NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Development and Change* 38 (2007), pp.251-274. Also Jennifer Fluri "'Foreign Passports Only": Geographies of (Post) Conflict Work in Kabul, Afghanistan', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99 (2009), pp. 986-994.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the international currency of 'empowerment' and 'active citizenship' discourses in NGOs, and the role of international donors in promoting them, see Anita Lacey and Suzan Ilcan, 'Voluntary Labor, Responsible Citizenship, and International NGOs', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 47 (2006), pp. 34-53; see also Lynn Staeheli and Daniel Hammett, ' "For the Future of the Nation": Citizenship, Nation, and Education in South Africa, *Political Geography* 32 (2013), pp. 32-41.

<sup>28</sup> All of the interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms.

<sup>29</sup> The Lebanese state has been reluctant to address squarely or explicitly the atrocities of the war, and there has been no 'truth and reconciliation' process in the country (though there are plans to construct a 'Garden of Forgiveness' in downtown Beirut—a less controversial and more anodyne measure than a public civil war memorial). This is related

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to the fact that many of the key players in the civil war, granted amnesty by a 1991 law, remained active participants in the state after the war. Much of the 'memory work' vis-à-vis the civil war has been taken up by intellectuals and civil society (for instance, the NGO 'Act for Disappeared', which has occupied part of a downtown park for years to gain recognition for the thousands of Lebanese who disappeared during the civil war) or by ordinary people, who use posters, graffiti, small shrines to commemorate the heroism and martyrdom of particular militia leaders. Sune Haugbolle, 'Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 25 (2005), pp. 191-203. For further discussion of the politics of memory and memorialization in Lebanon, see Lucia Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press (2010).

<sup>30</sup> At the time of my interview with Amal, she had not sought the sponsorship of any international donor organizations.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Lacey and Ilcan, 'Voluntary Labor'

<sup>32</sup> Solidere was the creation of former Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005. He is the father of Saad Hariri.

<sup>33</sup> The redevelopment of Beirut's downtown transformed what had been a mixed-class and mixed-sectarian shopping area to a luxury shopping district targeted at the wealthiest Lebanese and Gulf Arabs. In recent years, the Solidere area has suffered from high vacancy rates—partly the result of a Hizbullah-led protest that occupied the downtown area for 18 months in 2007-8. See Saree Makdisi, 'Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere', *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997), pp. 664-705. For a more nuanced account of the Solidere district, see Craig Larkin, 'Remaking Beirut: Contesting Memory, Space, and the Urban Imaginary of Lebanese Youth', *City and Community* 9 (2010), pp. 414-442.

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<sup>34</sup> If Sanaya Gardens had been turned into a parking lot, it would not have been available for occupation by the secular/anti-sectarian protest movement that set up camp in the park in 2011.

<sup>35</sup> See Jeffrey, 'Geopolitical Framing'; also Caroline Nagel and Lynn Staeheli, 'International Donors, NGOs, and the Geopolitics of Youth Citizenship in Contemporary Lebanon', *Geopolitics* (forthcoming).

<sup>36</sup> Paul Kingston, 'Patrons, Clients, and Civil Society: A Case Study of Environmental Politics in Post-war Lebanon', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 23 (2001), pp. 55-72.