



# POWER2YOUTH

## Youth Mobilization in Lebanon: Navigating Exclusion and Seeds for Collective Action

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## Youth Mobilization in Lebanon: Navigating Exclusion and Seeds for Collective Action

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates youth mobilization in Lebanon. It is organized in two main sections. The first section analyses patterns of youth inclusion and exclusion in the context of Lebanese sectarian politics, showing how partisan groups, religious and family authorities lock-in the youth. It then moves to an overview of “independent” NGOs, examining youth mobilization in NGOs since 2005. It focuses on the role of youth-led organizations (YLOs) and youth-relevant organizations (YROs) in three policy domains: entrepreneurship, personal rights and spatial planning. The second section reflects on NGOs’ professionalization and on youth’s related demobilization, discussing how youth’s associational life reproduces sectarian politics, and depoliticizes engagement. I also examine the rise of coalitions, arguing that they may be the components for future collective action, and reflect on whether this can form the seeds of an independent social movement among the youth. The paper concludes with a synthesis of opportunities and challenges facing youth mobilization in Lebanon.*

**Keywords:** Lebanon | Youth | NGOs

### INTRODUCTION

The “youth” category is defined legally by the Ministry of Youth and Sports as those between the ages of 15 and 25. Scholars and policy makers disagree and expand this age bracket to 15-29 years of age, and sometimes to 18-35 years. Youth means *Lebanese* youth, and is exclusive of the large numbers of other non-Lebanese youth in Lebanese cities and towns. The attempt by the youth advocacy forum to incorporate Palestinian youth in the youth national policy-making process did not yield results. In our focus groups, many youth defined themselves through their ability to change things, to make a difference, to work against oppression. Several disagreed on an age-based definition, and refused the very idea of categorizing of youth, saying their work is about engaging anyone interested in change. Two female participants said that their organizations include members above 30, and they consider these people to be youth by virtue of their activism, and the time they allocate for it. Another male participant, in his 40s, jokingly said: “I only realized I no longer belonged to the youth group a couple of years ago!” One female activist added: “For me, youth should be defined as agents of change!”

### Overview: The Structural Context of Youth Mobilization

The public policy understanding of Lebanese youth is dominated by a generic and normative understanding of youth exclusion mainly focused on issues of youth unemployment, youth emigration and skewed female-male balance, that should be addressed through policy

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responses - which are mostly wishful in nature. International organizations produce relatively more in-depth knowledge about youth exclusion, but they still focus on the same “problem” categories of unemployment and emigration, with some additional challenges related to education and political participation.

The academic understanding of Lebanese youth provides a more substantive and critical understanding of youth exclusion, and more interestingly, some input with regard to their efforts and initiatives to participate socially and politically, despite the numerous hurdles that constrain their inclusion. Scholars have indeed produced a larger range of youth-related issues, albeit with significant fragmentation across academic disciplines and language.

“Youth” and youth “problems” are “constructed” categories, which are significantly disembedded from the complex dynamics of legal, economic, social, political and spatial planning policy issues in Lebanon. They are also often reproduced by a wide variety of policy actors, and sometimes experts and scholars, without taking into account how these problems intersect with wider and transversal policy issues related to, say, personal rights, civil laws, gender discrimination, domestic violence, voting rights, citizenship, labour law, access to housing, public transportation, public space, building law, etc. Thus, “youth” needs to be unpacked as a category related to other indicators, linked to social relations and experiences, which are able to reveal that being young is a very diverse and subjective experience that intersects with several other relationships and inequalities.

Across the four policy sectors of employment, migration, family and personal status laws, and spatial planning, a large proportion of youth in Lebanon are actively excluded from the economic, political, social and urban spheres. Public policies are not imagined nor elaborated in ways to actively include youth in policy decisions about issues that concern their selves and livelihoods. For public agents, youth are not a priority social group to engage in the reconstruction and reform processes. They are marginalized in a peripheral ministry - the Ministry of Youth and Sports - where youth issues are reduced to social and cultural concerns, and divorced from politics, under the fake narrative of separating politics and conflict from society. The tentative move to develop a Youth National Policy ended up being co-opted by youth wings of political parties, and diluted into a generic policy agenda. Hence, this is the macro-picture of youth in Lebanon. Youth are depoliticized persons, passive agents, unworthy of being seen and heard, unless they contribute to concrete problem-solving and capacity-building initiatives, generically packaged as non-political and non-sectarian, or they provide potentially successful entrepreneurship projects to business incubators. They are also welcome to migrate, and to demonstrate to the world the genius of the Lebanese mind, succeeding abroad while investing at home.

Paradoxically, although public policy largely ignores youth or, at best, minimizes their role as active agents of social and political change, Lebanese youth are portrayed as a “problem” in relation to their unemployment, and their emigration desires, which generate a “brain drain.” The Lebanese youth who leave are portrayed as the “lost generation,” the lost hope of a golden future for Lebanon, and those who stay behind represent a group that is stigmatized, looked down upon and feared. These are also gendered into single young men characterized by low-level education and low skills, unemployable, with a propensity to become radicalized or a social burden. They are also gendered into single young women, who will marry late or

not at all, and become spinsters - again a social burden.

### **Mobilization and Emigration, amidst Wars and Refugees**

The 2011 Arab uprisings were not a particularly salient milestone for the Lebanese, or for youth in this country. Critical junctures in Lebanon were the March 2005 Independence Intifada which unravelled after the assassination of Rafic Hariri in February of the same year, the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon and the 2008 May events that saw for the first time sectarian conflict opposing Shia and Sunni. The 2011 Syrian war, and influx of refugees, is certainly another critical juncture that Lebanon is currently undergoing. These events accelerated the out-migration of highly educated and skilled youth. They further complicated the prospects of reform and reconstruction at the national scale, and reinforced the role of international donors and the private sector in defining the policy agendas of the country. Amidst these episodes of wars, conflicts and refugee influx, young people became mobilized in the dozens of NGOs created in the aftermath of the 2005 Independence Intifada - mostly NGOs centred on promoting citizenship, capacity-building, inter-sectarian dialogue, social cohesion, conflict resolution and human rights. In addition, in the context of the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, NGOs and coalitions focused on social services, education, health, rebuilding and environmental issues. I discuss this period of mobilization in greater detail below.

### **Framework of Analysis**

Before that discussion, however, I will present the framework that guides my analysis, which is based on Migdal's analysis of the state in the developing world and Kingston's recent work on Lebanese NGOs' abilities to alter politics. I thus posit the Lebanese state as a weakly institutionalized state without integrative authority frameworks, dominated by fragmented, adversarial and competing forms of clientelist networks that penetrate the state to entrench and reproduce their power. Kingston argues that

in weakly institutionalized states where formal rules are not the only game in town, regimes tend to be hybrid in nature, characterized by a complex intertwining of the formal with the informal, of the universal with the more particularistic. In these situations, the access of associational life to the state and its resources is likely to be less universalist and more reflective of the particularistic political dynamics generated by the regime's hybridity, thus providing enduring advantages to some segments of associational life while disadvantaging others [...] potentially leaving them [...] with little to no significant access to the political arena at all (Kingston 2013:13-14).

However, Kingston tells us the picture is not that grim as

there remains a paradox with respect to the path-dependent dynamics of such hybrid political systems, [for] the often-shifting nature of political alliances and power relations that characterizes them [...] also creates opportunities for more open-ended processes of political bargaining. [...] It is here that possibilities for the exercise of restricted agency emerge" (Kingston 2013:14).

Could this potential for restricted agency yield to sustained collective action that may generate a durable social movement in the hybrid Lebanese political system? That is the question I aim to address in this paper.

The paper is organized in two main sections. In the first section, I investigate patterns of youth inclusion and exclusion in the context of Lebanese sectarian politics, showing how partisan groups, religious and family authorities lock in youth. I then move to an overview of “independent” NGOs, examining youth mobilization in NGOs since 2005. I focus on the role of youth-led organizations (YLOs) and youth-relevant organizations (YROs) in three policy domains: entrepreneurship, personal rights and spatial planning. In the second section, I reflect on NGOs’ professionalization and on youth’s related demobilization, discussing how youth’s associational life reproduces sectarian politics, and depoliticizes engagement. I also examine the rise of coalitions, arguing that they may be the components for future collective action, and reflect on whether this can form the seeds of an independent youth social movement. I conclude with a synthesis of opportunities and challenges facing youth mobilization in Lebanon.

## 1. YOUTH INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN THE CONTEXT OF SECTARIAN POLITICS

### 1.1 The State, Sectarian Political Parties and Families: Locking Youth In

As discussed in our Power2Youth paper (Harb 2016a), the *state* does not prioritize youth in its public policies. Only in 2011 did its ministry of Youth and Sports develop a national youth policy which, as we have demonstrated, pays lip service to the urgent needs of Lebanese youth rather than substantively addressing them. Indeed, a critical reading of the document reveals that this is not really a “youth policy” per se, but rather a generic wish list of a range of policy issues that ought to be addressed. It very much seems that the contents of the document were intentionally diluted under very general terms to maintain consensus among the authors of the “policy.” Indeed, what remains from the Youth Advocacy Process and the Youth Forum that grouped 36 different NGOs is a small group of at most a dozen NGOs, and all the youth wings of the political parties. Thus, the Youth Forum today is mainly composed of the youth wings’ members rather than of the NGOs, and they seem to have drafted the Youth Policy document in such a way as to comfort their political patrons, removing all possible contentious reference to divisive politics. The policy-led discourse on Lebanese youth predominantly focuses on two main issues: youth unemployment and youth migration. Other issues are sometimes addressed, such as education and entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, salient issues relevant to youth such as job creation, income inequality, knowledge production, gender discrimination, civil rights, political rights, rights to public space and leisure are conspicuously absent from policy debates, and hence from public policy-making.

The main *sectarian groups* that constitute the state (or the political system) are in agreement that youth matters are better taken care of within their own structures: their political parties, their foundations and their NGOs. Thus, all the major sectarian political groups in Lebanon have their own “youth wings,” which are organizations targeting youth, socializing them through sports, leisure and cultural events, and ultimately mobilizing them into their partisan structure. Some parties have more elaborate and professionalized youth wings than others,

such as Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces.

There are ten main sectarian-based political parties in Lebanon (Hezbollah, Amal movement, Future Movement, Tajaddod, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement/FPM, Lebanese Forces, Marada, Kataeb, Druze PSP, Armenian Tachnak), and all have their own institutions that service youth. Political parties' youth "wings" are more or less active in providing youth services such as sports, scouting and training - depending on the party's financial resources and ability to access public services. For instance, Kataeb and Marada have much less ability to organize youth activities than Hezbollah and Future Movement. Most of these youth wings are not youth-led. In addition, about six youth-relevant organizations are led by Lebanese political elites who serve their own sectarian-based youth constituency, such as the Safadi and Makhzoumi Foundations. In the box below, I feature how Hezbollah has succeeded in building a meaningful and professional holistic network of service provision, that has been effectively mobilizing Shia youth for more than thirty years now. In my earlier work, I argue that Hezbollah represents the "success story" of the Lebanese political system, which legitimizes the independent and direct provision of social services by sectarian groups to their own constituency (Harb 2010). I feature Hezbollah here for two reasons: on one hand, its mobilization strategies provide insight into the reasons youth are attracted to political Islam. On the other hand, they reveal the "ideal type" through which Lebanese political parties operate to engage youth early on in their ranks, and maintain them locked into their holistic clientelistic system of service provision. This is especially true for political parties with strong ideology such as the Tachnak and the Lebanese Forces, which best compare to Hezbollah in terms of managing autonomous professional institutions - but with much less financial resources. For the other political parties where political ideology is more fluid, and less ideological - such as the Amal movement, Future Movement, Aoun's FPM, PSP and the Kataeb - mobilization strategies are less organized and professionalized, more clientelistic in their structure, and parasitic of public resources (Harb 2010).

As far as youth mobilization is concerned, Hezbollah manages two organizations that are specifically dedicated to youth (Harb 2010). One is the Mobilization Unit, which incorporates a youth and sports department that manages youth clubs and sports activities - including scouts (*al-Mehdi*), a successful football club (*al-Ahd*), youth summer camps, field trips and cultural activities for youth. The party owns several sports fields across south Beirut, and many clubs that include more than one hundred teams trained in diverse sports (ping pong, basketball, volleyball, karate, boxing, gymnastics). Several teams are professional, and participate in national sports competitions. They also showcase games during religious occasions and commemorations such as Jerusalem Day, Martyrs Day or Adha. Al-Mehdi scouts also operate according to strict recruitment and mobilization structures and yearly activities, associated to Hezbollah schools and educational activities. The second Hezbollah organization catering to youth needs is a cultural production NGO, the Lebanese Arts Association (LAA), which organizes music, theatre and leisure activities for youth, in addition to building museums and parks (e.g., Mleeta, Khiam, Maroun el-Rass). In both organizations, youth activities in Hezbollah segregate girls from boys, and socialize them differently - along the classical division lines of more physical activities for the latter and more artistic activities for the former. The purpose of both the Mobilization Unit and the LAA is to engage youth into purposeful and meaningful sports and cultural activities that engage the body and mind in activities centred on the values of resistance. Hezbollah's methods of mobilization



are quite representative of those of other mainstream religious organizations and political elites' foundations. For instance, al-Makhzoumi Foundation, led by a rich businessman who ran for national elections, invests in vocational training, micro-credit lending, social service provision and providing job opportunities - a holistic programme of activities that resemble Hezbollah's.<sup>2</sup> Also, al-Irshad wal Islah - a popular Sunni Islamic charity - actively invests in purposeful and gender-segregated leisure activities for youth.<sup>3</sup>

**Box 1 | A Meaningful and Professional Holistic Network of Service Provision, or How Hezbollah Continues to Effectively Mobilize Shia Youth in Lebanon**

While Hezbollah began as a movement of armed resistance to this Israeli occupation of Lebanon in the mid-1980s, it has since developed into a political party that works within the post-civil war Lebanese state. Since 1992, the party has carried a major bloc in the Lebanese Parliament and numerous elected municipal positions throughout the country; since 2005 it has participated as members of the cabinet. In addition, the party is loosely affiliated with one of the largest and most efficient social welfare networks in the country and similarly is allied with private entrepreneurs who share its moral and political stances. Hezbollah's institutions are non-governmental organizations (NGOs), registered with the Ministry of Interior. Their administrative and financial relationships to the party vary: some are local branches of Iranian organizations and do not report directly to the party while others have been established by Hezbollah and report directly to its ruling bodies. Others are managed by party cadres but are financially and administratively autonomous. In turn, these fall into two main groups, those providing services to users directly or indirectly involved in the military resistance and those managing social, religious, financial and urban services oriented towards a larger audience. Hezbollah's institutions operate as a network characterized by its holistic qualities as it provides a comprehensive set of policies to users, framing diverse components of their needs and daily lives. Moreover, and since Hezbollah was voted to be in charge of local governance in Dahiye in 1998, these institutions have been partnering with its municipal councils which significantly rely on their expertise for elaborating and implementing local development strategies as well as social policies. Three organizational features explain the success and the durability of these institutions. First, Hezbollah's institutions are responsive and accountable thanks to a decentralized system of operations that maximizes the outreach of Hezbollah's networks, ensures their responsiveness to local needs while disseminating participatory values, and guarantees regular feedback to the service providers, enabling them to adapt their services to local needs. This socio-spatial "embeddedness" also helps in developing trust between service users and Hezbollah's institutions, enhancing their accountability. Second, the party's institutions have a strong leadership and rely on professional standards. The institution's leader is typically a charismatic male, professional and/or educated, often with past experience in militant work, calm and composed, able to act as a role model for his employees and to project the institution's professional image. The institutions' directors rotate on a regular basis, insuring a steady administrative turnover, and building their mana-

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Makhzoumi Foundation, 9 July 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with al-Irshad, 22 July 2015.



gerial capacities across policy sectors. Third, Hezbollah's institutions perform well and are considered effective, especially in a context known for its corruption and bureaucratic laxity. Hezbollah's institutions are keen on scientific knowledge, rational thinking and technical expertise as these are believed to produce effective and "modern" outputs. In addition, Hezbollah's institutions trust learning from experience; they evaluate their work regularly and revise their policy agendas accordingly.

Organizational features are not the only explanation for Hezbollah's institutional success. Upon closer examination, these features are systematically related in the decision-makers' narratives to a religious rhetoric that justifies the concept of social justice (*'adala*) and participation (*ishrak*), and relates professionalism to excellence (*itqan*) while effectiveness is grounded in modernity values (*hadara*). Indeed, Hezbollah's organizational structure incorporates a pious morality that defines codes, norms and values referred to by the terms *hala*, *bi'a* or *jaw* - from which the adjective *islamiyya* is deleted as it is internalized, and which I am translating as Islamic milieu or sphere. Sometimes this milieu is also described as *mujtamaa' al-muqawama* - the society of the resistance. The Islamic milieu aggregates different pious groups around Hezbollah's institutions, irrespective of the religious authority whom they emulate. It proposes one common denominator for these groups: obedience to "authentic" piety (*iltizam*). Consequently, resistance is perceived and experienced as a mission, a duty and a way of life. It goes beyond combat and becomes an individual process, carried out through daily practices related to body, sound, signs and space, transmitting "religious and community knowledge" (Deeb 2006:60).

Source: Harb 2008:215-223, Harb 2010.

Political parties are quite active at the university level, through their university students' organizations, which recruit and mobilize young people on campus, especially through club activities, and during elections of student representatives. University campuses are quite polarized in that sense, which can prevent the holding of university elections in times of heightened sectarian polarization such as 2008 and 2009. Some campuses are strongly associated with one or more political parties. Thus, the Lebanese University (LU, the only public university) is known to be the turf of Amal Movement, with substantive presence for Hezbollah as well, and a minor presence, since 2013, of a secular club by the name of "Sama," which is struggling to maintain its space: "We organized a concert near the Roman ruins, here on campus. This is a neglected space, and we seized the opportunity to hold the concert there to highlight the importance of a meeting point for all LU students."<sup>4</sup> The Saint-Joseph University is notorious for being the site of Christian political parties who compete for representation - the Lebanese Forces and Aoun's FPM. In an interview, the LF representative explained how the LF party directly funds their activities, especially during the period of elections, and agrees with them on their projects. All student organizations recruit early on in the academic year, and actively rely on Facebook and WhatsApp in communication. Some use Facebook for researching the political affiliation of students, and tailor their recruitment strategy accordingly.<sup>5</sup> Student organizations can be quite powerful recruitment and mobilization agents. My interlocutor at Tajaddod Youth explained that at the height of

<sup>4</sup> Interview at Lebanese University, 28 September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Interview at Saint Joseph University, 7 October 2015.

their movement, most of their membership came from universities, and that is how Tajaddod built its party's youth base, which differentiated it from other parties - in addition to the fact that it was the sole party advocating democratic political reform outside sectarian allegiances.<sup>6</sup> Currently, because Tajaddod no longer has the financial means to invest in university student organizations, their outreach has shrunk, and they are losing their youth edge. My interlocutor emphasizes the generational conflict within the party itself, between party leaders whom she critiques as unwilling to take risks, and Tajaddod's youth base who are keen on more interventionist and innovative strategies for change. This conflict seems to be at a dead-end, and appears to reduce the ability of the party to attract new members and to position itself within a landscape dominated by sectarian politics - despite the fact that it is delivering an alternative message on the partisan scene, capable of rallying a wide range of youth. This was echoed in an interview with an NGO which tried to work on a project with youth wings of political parties, where the aim was to encourage youth wings to rethink their political party's agenda: "The project broke off a year into it because the parties' leaders disagreed with it."<sup>7</sup>

Most student organization leaders know each other, communicate and cooperate on key issues taking place on university campuses, such as club fairs, orientation fairs, student demands, etc. Two last points to mention regarding university student organizations: they are mostly led by young men, except for Tajaddod Youth which includes one young woman; and they are all members of the National Youth Policy network, which seems to serve as a useful collective platform for regular interaction.

In addition to agreeing on the key role they give to sectarian politics, political elites profess that *family and kin* should also manage youth. And, given that family affairs in Lebanon are structurally linked to religious affairs, both family and religious authorities have a major role to play in youth socialization, and hence mobilization, directly or indirectly through norms, values and attitudes (see Harb 2016a:15-17). Legal texts governing the private and public lives of youth in Lebanon are hetero-normative, gender-biased and sectarian-based, curbing norms and practices that do not fit to this framework (UNESCO 2012:192). Personal status laws discriminate between the rights of men and women, as well as rights of adults and minors (Mikdashy 2013:351). The citizenship law is a notorious example as, to date, Lebanese women still cannot pass on their nationality to their foreign spouse or their offspring. Women face significant discrimination in the case of divorce and child custody. Saghie points to three main consequences that youth face due to these structural faults: first, they are strictly framed in relation to their sectarian belonging; second, their ability - especially women - to organize their everyday lives is largely constrained; third, people who do not fit the perceived "normal" frame (queer, transsexuals, homosexuals, illegal children, offspring of Lebanese women and foreigners, and all those outside the 18 recognized sectarian groups) are largely excluded from the society (UNESCO 2012:192-195). Joseph argues that "patriarchal connective construct[ion] of selves" predominate within Lebanese families (Joseph 2004:274). However, as noted by Faour (1998:11), things are changing with regard to family relations and authority within the family. He underscores a rise in the percentage of middle and upper class students who identify with their peer group (which seem to be replacing the extended family and

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Tajaddod, 25 June 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Development for People and Nature Association (DPNA), 21 September 2015.

religion). This fits with Herrera's analysis of the transformation of youth's avenues for knowledge acquisition - more horizontal and bidirectional (Herrera 2006). Joseph highlights how in weak states such as Lebanon, familial relations "are often the primary protectors of persons' security," adding that in times of war, people will "intensify familial relationships to secure themselves" (Joseph 2004:274). She also argues that this intensification is conversely associated with a destabilization of family relations due to war displacement, and war stresses - a paradox that in the post-war period opened "new possibilities for experimentation" and transformation of notions of family, gender, and self (Joseph 2004:276 and 292). In their work on morality and piety in south Beirut, Deeb and Harb (2013) note how young Shiites draw from several and changing moral rubrics to inform their leisure choices, preferences and practices, which they openly negotiate and justify. In their analysis of cultural practices of youth, Stephan-Hachem and Charara-Beydoun (2011) note the dynamic role youth undertake in defining their livelihoods, negotiating a variety of authoritarian structures. This is also affirmed by Gonzalez-Quijano (2003), who reflects on the relationship of Lebanese young people to online media, and their agency in determining the content they select to watch and read - disagreeing with other findings that discuss the high levels of youth inclusion in media consumption but their limited input with regard to media production (Melki 2010). NGOs that provide services and legal advice on family and personal status matters (such as Legal Agenda, Marsa, Helem, CRTD-A, Abaad, etc.) play a key role in providing young people with access to alternative sources of information, and to supportive networks. They thus contribute in the provision of important avenues for navigating the family and kinship hegemonic discourse. I will discuss this in the next section.

## 1.2 NGOs and Youth: An Overview

As discussed, youth's prospects for mobilization and collective action outside the realm of sectarian political organizations and family structures are quite constrained. However, the Lebanese scene incorporates a large number of "*independent*" NGOs led by people who are eager to challenge this locked political system - even if many are led by their own ambitions. Many of those NGOs target youth as their main constituency with the hope of providing them with viable alternatives to sectarian leadership. Young people, dissatisfied with current mobilization alternatives, have established several of such NGOs. In this paper, I examine the NGOs that are *not* established by political and religious leaders, in an open bias to assess the collective agency of young Lebanese outside the mainstream frames of sectarian mobilization. I name those "independent NGOs," although I am dissatisfied with the term, as I am conscious that their independence is only relative, and they surely have their own dependencies, of which external funding is a major one. I single out these NGOs as I am interested in gauging the opportunities and challenges they face, and their abilities to operate in a hostile environment which is dominated by sectarian politics, fear of the other, social and spatial fragmentation, and polarization. I want to identify and compare the strategies they use for provoking collective action - albeit small in scale and short-lived - and derive lessons for furthering advocacy and mobilization.

There are very few quantitative sources available in Lebanon on youth participation, and the ones we identified differ widely in their listing. The list of registered NGOs is available in the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), but is not public. According to a recent report that surveyed a sample of the operational NGOs in Lebanon, the number of registered NGOs

in the MoIM amounts to 8,311 (BRD 2015:7). Among those, however, only 1,100 are effectively operational (BRD 2015:23). The report also indicates that 41 percent of these NGOs lack human resources, while 60 percent are short on financial resources, and 74 percent have an operational budget of less than 250,000 dollars (BRD 2015:8 and 60). A second inventory of NGOs (by the online database Daleel Madani<sup>8</sup>) lists about 420 NGOs. Those are the ones that voluntarily choose to register their information online. Of these, nearly 100 (i.e., 25 percent) deal with youth-relevant issues. A third list comes from the Lebanese Youth Forum,<sup>9</sup> which tables about 100 NGOs that have actually responded to its inquiries.

To build our database, we relied on the latter two sources: Daleel Madani and the Lebanese Youth Forum. However, because these sources are not consistently valid, we also did extensive crosschecks of their listings, and referred to newspapers, media outlets (TV, radio), social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs) and a literature review of civil society organizations in Lebanon. The total number of youth-relevant NGOs we have identified so far is 117, distributed as shown in the table 1 below.<sup>10</sup> Note that these are not always the same youth-relevant NGOs in the Daleel Madani or Youth Forum listings.

**Table 1 | Youth-Relevant NGOs in Lebanon (May 2015)**

<b>NGOs</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Organizations related to government and political parties	20	17
2. NGOs	78	67
2a. Student/Labour Unions	6	5
2b. Business/Finance/Entrepreneurship	14	12
2c. Rights-Based	20	17
2d. Development/Advocacy	22	19
2e. Religious	11	9
2f. Other (Art/Cultural)	5	4
3. Coalitions/Non-conventional NGOs	19	16
Total	117	100

NGOs form the bulk of our database. We identified 78 NGOs that are YLOs or YROs. Many of them work on human and/or personal rights, and in the development and/or advocacy field (about 35 percent). The rest are dispersed among entrepreneurship, religious, student activism and artistic/cultural initiatives. Most of these NGOs are based in Beirut, though a few are keen on operating in regions, especially in Mount Lebanon, the South and the North.

<sup>8</sup> Daleel Madani is an information and research centre for and about civil society in Lebanon, which includes an online searchable directory of NGOs in Lebanon (<http://daleel-madani.org/directory>), and a listing of 420 NGOs (note that the listing includes more institutions - private, international, academic and governmental - not included in the count), available at this link: <http://daleel-madani.org/webdirectory-ngos>.

<sup>9</sup> The Lebanese Youth Forum is the platform that worked on the youth national policy (see WP2 Lebanon chapter), and groups 14 youth NGOs and 21 youth wings of political parties (<http://www.youthforum-lb.org/en>). The Youth Forum has published a directory of 103 youth NGOs (not available online). It is unclear how many of those are active.

<sup>10</sup> See also UNESCO (2015).

We have not been able to identify NGOs in the poor regions of Beqaa, Hermel and Akkar (but that does not mean they do not exist - they are probably not listed in the sources we used).

Lebanon has been home to a large number of NGOs, even before the time of its civil war (1975-90). This is largely facilitated by legal regulations that make establishing an NGO an easy process: as few as four people can decide to establish an NGO, and can go register it with the MoIM, which then issues a number that legalizes the existence of the NGO. Youth activism is portrayed positively in the general discourse as long as it does not threaten to dominant political, social and moral orders - youth are the future generation we have "hope" in, we are "proud" of our dynamic and successful young people, etc. But, when youth critique the establishment too forcefully, by protesting against it in the street, or by producing a film unpacking its corrupt scaffolding, they will surely get criminalized as "bad and immoral," as a "security threat," and will suffer violent consequences and censorship - as recently experienced with the mobilization that took place in response to the garbage crisis and was vehemently and repeatedly repressed by the police (I discuss this further below).

During the civil war of Lebanon, NGOs did not privilege youth matters, as priorities were more about relief and social services. After the end of the war, in the 1990s, several youth groups became mobilized into interest-based NGOs, keeping their distance from more identity-based NGOs that dominated the war scene. Of those, we note NGOs advocating environmental protection (Karam 2006), disability rights (Kingston 2014) and democratic elections (Atallah 2013). This was somehow a euphoric phase, when young people thought billionaire prime minister Rafic Hariri would salvage Lebanon, and put it back on the global map. Faith in his persona attracted a lot of young people who returned from abroad to engage in the process of rebuilding, and seek a job in the "Hariri network." After 1996, cracks begin to show: debt accumulates, Israel wages war in the South of Lebanon, investment promises fail to happen, Dubai's economic growth eclipses Beirut, etc. The *troika* or *muhassasa* logic of allotment increasingly penetrates public institutions, which become dysfunctional and are progressively replaced by parallel administrations funded by international donors, while service provision is privatized, under the pretext of better efficiency. In practice, corruption and clientelism prevail, enriching sectarian elites at the expense of the people, increasing inequality and injustice (Leenders 2012). There is a short glimpse of hope with the holding of municipal elections in 1998, after a long campaign led by civil society groups, including many youth. But Syrian tutelage over political, economic and social affairs is heavy, and will ultimately lead to the breaking of ties between Hariri and Syria. In 2005, the murder of Hariri galvanizes Beirut's streets. The Independence Intifada brings thousands of people to Martyrs Square in downtown Beirut who camp there for nights requesting justice and the departure of the Syrian Army from Lebanon. They chant for national unity, independence and Lebanon. The Syrian Army announces its withdrawal, and the anti-Hariri coalition, centred around the Shia parties of Hezbollah and Amal, organizes a farewell party thanking Syria for its services in Lebanon, in Riad el-Solh square just meters away from the Hariri "camp," bringing out thousands of people on March 8 2015. The opposition group will take this date as its name, becoming known as the March 8 coalition. Days later, on March 14, the Hariri "camp" celebrates the departure of the Syrian Army, bringing its own thousands onto the streets. The naïve slogans of Independence do not hold very long, and are quickly taken over by sectarian political parties, who organize themselves into a March 14 coalition. The polarization of Lebanese society into March 8 and March 14 has continued, although political

alliances and oppositions have reconfigured memberships in odd ways that are beyond the scope of this report.

### 1.3 Two Phases of Youth Mobilization in NGOs (2005-09 and 2009-15)

I identified two main phases of youth mobilization in NGOs. The first (2005-09) begins after the assassination of prime minister Rafic Hariri in 2005 and continues up until the 2009 national elections. It is marked by a wide range of youth mobilization attempts to reform the sectarian political system, mostly operational via NGOs but also via the Take Back Parliament campaign. These attempts lead to a dead-end however, as national elections occur based on an election law that pre-determines the winners - mainly the same hegemonic players (or their buddies). The second phase (2009-now) is marked by the Arab uprisings and the Syrian war in 2011; it is marked by a strong sense of helplessness coupled with anger, which may be radicalizing youth mobilization.

The year 2005 is seen as a turning point on the youth mobilization scene by the majority of our interlocutors, one of whom notes how “after the withdrawal of the Syrians, political prospects appeared possible.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, a new wave of youth NGOs emerged in the aftermath of 2005, seeking political reform. Youth were galvanized and dreamed of change. They established or joined NGOs. Of these initiatives, I mention the Youth Economic Forum (YEF), which was established in 2007 with the idea of engaging youth to inform public policy making. YEF worked on mobilizing hundreds of youth throughout Lebanese regions, training them in elaborating policy briefs on key policy issues. The briefs were published and disseminated, in the aim of building up youth’s political consciousness in preparation for the 2009 national elections.<sup>12</sup> Many other initiatives developed in parallel, centred on ideas of citizenship, conflict resolution, social cohesion, etc. In 2006, the Israeli war on Lebanon led to another wave of NGOs - mostly concerned with humanitarianism, reconstruction and coexistence. Termed “alternative NGOs,” these new youth organizations amounted to two dozen according to Clark and Zahar (2015:7), mostly concentrated in Beirut, and relying mainly on volunteers. Several of these NGOs were short-lived, and disappeared from the activism scene a few years later. Funding also poured into Lebanon but, paradoxically, it was not channelled to support these independent NGOs, but primarily March 14 NGOs, and political elites’ foundations (Clark and Zahar 2015). During this phase, NGOs navigated a turbulent terrain, polarized between March 8 and March 14 coalitions, punctuated with violence and explosions, social and spatial segregation, fear and insecurity. Youth kept to themselves, did not venture outside their neighbourhoods, were either politicized and territorial, or apathetic and oblivious. However, for some youth, the upcoming national elections represented a possible opportunity for change, especially as there was serious talk of redesigning the election law according to proportional representation, to make it possible for new political elites to get elected democratically.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Focus Group, 11 June 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> National elections in Lebanon are designed in such a way as to allow the most powerful political parties to win the most votes - namely these are the ones led by sectarian elites and their constituencies. Attempts to propose an alternative election law based on proportionality systematically fail, as none of the groups in power would benefit from such a change. Scholars often note election law as the cornerstone of any significant political change in Lebanon. See Salloukh (2006).



Their hopes were quickly crushed. In May 2008, in reaction to the Future Movement closing down its internal communication system, Hezbollah and Amal Movement attacked Beirut neighbourhoods, destroying the Future Movement's headquarters, generating damage and deaths. This exacerbated Sunni-Shia conflict and violence which ended in a Doha-brokered agreement in 2009, leading up to national elections that took place according to a law manufactured in such a way as to renew the mandates of existing March 8 and March 14 political leaders, and foreclosing any opportunities to change the political establishment. Several people perceived the 2009 elections as the end of a significant mobilization effort to change politics in Lebanon. One NGO activist told me:

In 2009, *khalas* (it's over), I gave up. I said to myself, never again will I believe in possibilities of change in this country. I really believed in the elections. I prepared myself to run them. In my NGO, we worked years for this. You think my ambition is to be in an NGO? Not at all. The NGO, from the very start, was my way to establish a party, and to run for elections, so I can change things. Now [...] I don't know. Maybe with this new generation, they are trying new things, maybe it will work with them. I don't know.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting a few comments on the *strategies of youth mobilization* within NGOs. Most of our interlocutors indicated their reliance on social media as a main tool of networking and dissemination, in addition to participation in workshops, fairs, conferences and training programs. Some use more elaborated methods of recruitment and mobilization than others (e.g., CSM uses students' clubs in universities to transmit its message; Adyan works in schools and is seeking to penetrate universities). Several appeared reactive, and discouraged from NGO work. These highlight problems they encounter in fundraising and attracting volunteers. In addition, most NGOs are urban, and centralized in medium and large-sized cities. Many are in Beirut, while only a few have branches in other regions (e.g., DPNA, Kafa). This does not mean, however, that there is no youth mobilization in peripheries and rural areas, but sources of information about this mobilization are not available, and require more field research. Some anecdotal information reveals that several youth who are members of NGOs in Beirut are also activists in their towns of origin in the South, the North or the Bekaa area (e.g., La Fasad activist). Often NGOs are far from policy advocacy and do not have strong relations with policy-makers and public agencies - except for a few who coordinate their advocacy work with public agents (e.g., Abaad and CRTD-A with the Ministry of Interior).

### 1.4 Three Policy Domains: Entrepreneurship, Personal Rights and Spatial Planning

There are no NGOs that directly operate in Lebanon in the field of migration. With regard to employment, an increasing number of NGOs are now actively involved in promoting entrepreneurship, organizing entrepreneurial boot camps, promoting start-up trainings, mentorship, etc. - which are tuned to encouraging young people to stay and invest in Lebanon, rather than resort to emigration. For example, Berytech is an incubator that helps youth find jobs by matching them with private companies. They provide them with competitive programmes, training, and some seed funding, which contribute to enhancing

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<sup>14</sup> Focus Group, 11 June 2015.



their entrepreneurship skills and technological know-how. Evidently, such initiatives are directed towards the educated middle-class youth, who already have many options to access information and networks through their own (private) university. Al Majmoua is a micro-credit NGO, which has recently launched a micro-credit programme for youth that seeks to redress the economic disempowerment of young people. They seek to empower young women and men through small loans and business training. SMART Center is a youth-relevant organization that trains NGOs to improve their media and image production strategy, so they become more visible, and hence more attractive to donors. They especially build the capacity of NGOs to brand themselves, define their mission and vision, and have a strong social media presence. They do this through holding training workshops for NGO members, and designing their online presence. Occasionally, they also help young people establish their NGO - helping them define its vision, scope and audience. It is interesting to note that SMART Center is a good example of a professionalized NGO that has found its business niche.

Personal rights are one of the most active sectors within which youth groups are mobilized. A plethora of organizations taking care of human rights (Alef, Sustainable Development Center-SDC), legal rights (Legal Agenda), women's rights (Kafa, Abaad, CRTD-A, Sawt al-Niswa) and LGBTQ rights (Helem, Meem, Marsa) exist on the NGO scene. NGOs working on rights issues are very connected to the work led by Legal Agenda, which is truly pioneering in terms of informing people about the law, its relation to the political and economic system, and the fact that justice is here to serve people. In coordination with Helem (the NGO protecting gay rights), Legal Agenda succeeded in its work with a judge who issued a legal decision stating that it is not illegal to be gay - "which is hugely symbolic."<sup>15</sup> Another example in this group is Marsa, an NGO that provides health services to LGBTQ people, working closely with university hospitals and public health programmes. Marsa has been effectively empowering its interlocutors, as well as transforming medical perceptions on LGBTQ people, highlighting issues of intersectionality: "our work makes people aware that all issues are interrelated, and that they have legal rights; we do that through paying huge attention to language and words used."<sup>16</sup> In this group, some NGOs need to operate underground and maintain a very discreet presence, because of the sensitivity of the issue and the need to keep their space safe and secure, protecting identities of members. This is the case for Meem, which started by supporting queer and transsexual individuals, but then shifted to becoming more of a feminist organization fighting sexism and patriarchy. My interlocutor underscored that her organization is all youth-led, all under 30, and that "older youth did not feel comfortable there - some had even left because of this age gap."<sup>17</sup>

Women's groups make up a vibrant sub-group in this category. Some promote knowledge production through regular online publications in Arabic, raising awareness on critical feminist issues, or simply engaging in a debate (Sawt al-Niswaa). Others are more your typical active NGOs, operating on the ground on a variety of advocacy issues ranging from domestic violence (Kafa), to claiming the right of the Lebanese mother to give nationality to her children (CRTD-A), to raising awareness on gender equality and women's rights (Abaad). As for the third policy domain, spatial planning, this is a domain with relatively few NGOs -

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<sup>15</sup> Focus Group, 11 June 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, 15 June 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Focus Group, 11 June 2015.

some of which more developmental in their scope than actually spatial (Greenline, Nahnoo, DPNA), including most of the coalitions we identified - which were mostly formed in the last five years. This is also a sector where a lot of young women are actively present, in leading positions. These are young people who are increasingly mobilized on issues in relation to "the right to the city" framework - where activists are claiming their right to participate to the making of their city's spaces, to freely use and experience public spaces and the commons, to navigate a liveable city as pedestrians and cyclists, to access affordable housing, and to stop the process of private real estate development that is taking away the city from its dwellers. More detail about this policy domain is provided in a separate case study, which gives a historical background about the genesis of these coalitions, looks at their strategies of action, and focuses on the success stories a few of them have managed to achieve over the past years.

## **2. YOUTH MOBILIZATION: REPRODUCING SECTARIAN POLITICS VS. PLANTING SEEDS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION**

### **2.1 NGOs: Professionalization, Depoliticization, Demobilization**

It is well known that NGOs operate according to a rather established process of work, where they identify an agenda, in close coordination with an international donor's agency, and agree on objectives, deliverables and activities. Deliverables may involve mobilizing youth outside of the office, and some public events. Typically, activities conclude after a certain period of time, resulting in reports, and perhaps workshops documenting activities and lessons learned. However, the picture is not that simple and rosy. NGOs are also competing over resources, and several may compromise their agenda and mission to adhere to the demands of a donor. Several scholars have worked on this professionalization of NGOs into a competitive industry where donors become authorities dictating NGO work, and NGOs become subservient to this power hierarchy, and dependent on donors' agendas (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, Moghnieh 2015). They critique how NGOs depoliticize and demobilize prospects of political and social change, especially among youth groups (Kothari 2005).

In the Lebanese case, Nagel and Staeheli (2014) underscore this process among the NGOs they worked with, and Nucho (2016) shows how NGOs lose their goals of empowering the communities they are working within because they are keen on abiding by donors' agendas and conditionalities. Karam (2006), Clark and Salloukh (2013), and Kingston (2013) also denounce how NGOs become co-opted by sectarian politics and entrenched private interests. Salloukh et al. (2015:53) detail further the strategies of the sectarian political elite in reproducing sectarianism among NGOs: they argue that NGOs are

strategic partners of both the sectarian/political elite and international organizations determined to involve the third sector in a governance model based on neoliberal structural adjustment and state retrenchment. Dependence on foreign aid consequently has skewed civil society's discourse in favor of reform and accommodation within the existing sectarian system. [...] S]ectarian elite strategies [...] manipulate, co-opt, and neutralize Lebanon's civil society sector (Salloukh et al. 2015:53).

They add that aid strategy promotes and accommodates the existing sectarian system rather than seeking to structurally transform it, which demobilizes the associational sector, and even uses them as springboards to public office or to its networks (Salloukh et al. 2015:58). In addition, the authors underscore how the NGO sector fails to engage working-class people into its anti-sectarian agenda, making it exclusive to an educated, globalized, middle- and upper-income group (Salloukh et al. 2015:59).

Sectarian political elites use violent techniques to repress NGOs and initiatives that contest and hold accountable the corrupt political system. As mentioned earlier, al-Hirak was silenced through police repression that harassed, threatened and terrorized protestors, beat them and jailed them - irrespective of gender and age groups. This was not the first time the sectarian political system has used coercive methods to close down youth mobilization. Following Syrian tutelage, the state has used violent strategies against civil society organizations, justifying its intervention by criminalizing youth, and accusing them of threatening security as well as the social and moral orders.

## **2.2 Coalitions: Scattered Components of Latent Collective Action?**

After the 2009 elections, a wave of despair and helplessness took over youth mobilization until the 2011 Arab uprisings, which timidly reverberated in Lebanon through the holding of short-lived and poorly organized street protests asking for the downfall of the sectarian regime - namely led by the Civil Society Movement NGO. Months later, in 2012, a group of activists, including leading feminists, launched the Take Back Parliament campaign. They sought to identify and mobilize one hundred people in an electoral list abiding by a political programme advocating an independent secular state, a socio-economic justice, and democracy. Some activists and NGO members who were eyeing the next national elections planned for 2015 joined them. However, the Take Back Parliament campaign died off a year or so later - due to the scepticism that surrounded it, the incapacity of making people agree on a collective programme, and disbelief in the capacity to disrupt sectarian politics in Lebanon through running for election (Maaroufi 2014). Critics also note that the Take Back Parliament movement did not manage to transcend its class limits to reach the youth mobilized with sectarian political parties, and remained a middle-class educated youth phenomenon - which in turn was a source of major helplessness for them, and ultimately defeat (Maaroufi 2014). However, several of its participants note that Take Back Parliament was a useful learning experience, and an important state of their political consciousness that can be further built upon and consolidated. It broke the March 8/14 monopoly and revealed the existence of a small, elitist but engaged group of secular independent young activists eager to participate in politics. Some of them continued their work in secular student organizations within universities, and managed to increase their impact in a few of these - namely the American University of Beirut, and the Lebanese American University (Maaroufi 2014).

The Syrian war has had a much more direct impact on the country, with the influx of refugees that began pouring in hundreds then in thousands to reach 1.5 million to date, parked in camps in Akkar and the Bekaa, and in cities and towns throughout Lebanon. The refugee crisis has been a new impetus for youth and NGOs to mobilize, to provide relief and support. It has also brought in more donor funding to NGOs that are redefining their agendas to present themselves as legitimate partners (e.g., Abaad, DPNA).

The refugee crisis has also been a great source of tension for the Lebanese, well exploited by political leaders who used it to decide that it was best to postpone the 2013 national elections because of insecurity. This generated ire, and isolated protests in the streets - led by NGOs and youth, rapidly and violently repressed. In May 2014, the presidential elections were cancelled, furthering the political limbo in a state with an illegitimate parliament, a dysfunctional government and no leadership. Resentment against the unaccountable corrupt political elite that only services its own narrow interests, and against the increasing inefficiency of basic service provision<sup>18</sup> has grown deeper. It erupted in an unprecedented wave of discontent and protests that took Beirut's streets in August 2015, in reaction to a scandalous garbage crisis, unresolved due to internal political bickering among political elites.

Led by a group calling itself #YouStink (tol3etre7etkom), dozens of small coalitions, NGOs and independent activists took to the streets, leading up to a sizable demonstration on 29 August requesting an ecological waste management plan to be led by municipalities, the resignation of the Ministry of Environment, and the holding of parliamentary elections according to new laws. Other demands were also made: reliable basic services, access to public space, and a privatized coastline, as well as holding accountable all the political elite across March 8 and March 14 camps. At the time of writing, *al-Hirak* (the movement) has toned down, after having faced violent repression from state police. For a brief moment, the movement was expanding in range and composition (new youth-led coalitions were emerging, outside of #YouStink, while more established ones such as the labour unions were joining in), and in geography (people were mobilizing in the North, the South and the Bekaa - against their territorial-based sectarian leaders) - this is probably what made the government resort to authoritarian interventions.

Al-Hirak was grounded in the works of a large group of coalitions, campaigns and NGOs I identified prior to its eruption. Indeed, since the Arab uprisings of 2011, new forms of youth mobilization have been taking place, especially in relation to issues of personal rights, and rights to the city. More or less loose coalitions of young people have been coming together around issues of public interest, such as LGBT rights, domestic violence, women's rights, destruction of urban heritage, privatization of the coast, right to affordable housing. I identified about twenty of them in the database, and they have increased since al-Hirak (#BadnaNhaseb, #3alShari3). Coalitions typically do not want to organize into an NGO, because either they are not interested in institutionalizing their claims, which they see as more issue-based, or because they dislike the rigid NGO structure. They call themselves campaign, coalition, collective, movement. They are loosely structured around a group of activists without a clear leadership, claiming that collective decision-making is their strength, and favouring horizontal forms of shared leadership. They opt for loose, informal means of operation, within which impulsive ideas and creativity become key agents for action. They rely extensively on social media (Facebook, Twitter, websites, blogs, E-zines and crowdfunding) to mobilize and disseminate their message, and brainstorm regularly in set meetings in cafés or a shared space. They build websites and use crowdfunding techniques. Many of them are increasingly resorting to legal strategies to develop their political action - partnering with lawyers or with

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<sup>18</sup> Electricity cuts across Lebanon are notorious. Water drought in 2014 also exerted a huge toll on people, who now had to purchase water from dubious uncontrolled sources. Traffic in Lebanon has reached very high congestion levels that are significantly constraining people's mobility.

the NGO Legal Agenda. An interesting feature of such coalitions is the high percentage of young women in leading positions, including in street demonstrations.

## CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF AN INDEPENDENT YOUTH SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Youth activism in Lebanon has changed since 2011 to include a range of new initiatives that are not youth typical NGOs - civil coalitions and campaigns that rely extensively in their modes of action on research, legal expertise, multi-scalar networking and social media. They form about 15 percent of the youth-relevant organizations we surveyed. They are mostly issue-based, following through one specific issue that they name themselves after, but they also extremely well informed about other issues, and network with other NGOs that are more holistic in their demands. Coalitions are much more empowered today than NGOs, which suffer fatigue and burnout, and are delegitimized in their action because they are often instrumentalized, demobilized and co-opted.

After 2011, youth activism in Lebanon became more openly anti-sectarian with a series of protests openly challenging the corrupt political system. In 2015, al-Hirak widely used social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs) to denounce the state repression it was subjected to, uploading huge numbers of videos and photos that helped them build court cases, and pressure the government to release abducted activists. Al-Hirak progressively ceased its protest actions, given that its components did not all agree on a common course of action, which led to its fragmentation into several groups. The government also severely policed protestors, making the wider social base that supported the movement more wary of mobilization. A range of accusations against the movement's leaders (regarding their independence, and sources of funding) also weakened people's trust in al-Hirak.

However, al-Hirak also revealed the existence of a critical mass of young activists who were fed up with sectarian politics. It allowed issue-based discussions to regain thrust. Among these discussions, one led to the establishment of a platform of urban activists who decided to organize a municipal campaign and run for the 2016 municipal elections in Beirut: they named themselves *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut, My City). Over a six-month period, they grouped a network of urban activists who had been working on a variety of urban issues, reclaiming rights to the city (Harb 2016a), and drafted a municipal programme, recruited municipal candidates and volunteers, organized neighbourhood committees and debates, and ran a noteworthy communication campaign on social media, as well as a crowdfunding campaign.<sup>19</sup> They managed to gather about 1,500 volunteers who rallied on election day, encouraging people to vote for a list of independent candidates eager to improve the liveability of the city. Beirut Madinati's list did not win but gathered 40 percent of the votes - a substantive score in the capital city dominated by sectarian politics. This score empowered all activist groups in Lebanon, and at the time of writing, independent municipal campaigns are running in other regions and towns of Lebanon - taking up similar names, such as *Jounieh Madinati*, *Nabatiyeh Madinati*, *Tripoli Madinati*, *Deir el-Kamar Baldati*, etc.

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<sup>19</sup> See their website: <http://www.beirutmadinati.com>, as well as their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. The Beirut Madinati crowdfunding campaign gathered close to 200,000 dollars in less than three weeks.

Youth mobilization in Lebanon has still to face major challenges to voice its demands for inclusion and durable change: a hegemonic sectarian political system that is protecting its assets, no effective political representation system that one can work within, and a fraught geopolitical context through which wars, conflicts and refugee crisis keep happening. Government policies vis-à-vis youth activism, especially when it consolidates to threaten the dominant political and moral order, vary between co-optation, manipulation, neutralization and repression (Salloukh et al. 2015). How can young people overcome these significant challenges? Many do not, and give in to the existing alternatives - namely the sectarian political system itself. Those who can, emigrate. And the ones who select to stay adapt or keep on struggling. Those who keep on struggling may be heartened by the innovation and creativity of the new coalitions and campaigns that have developed over the past years, especially after 2011. The high scores of the Beirut Madinati municipal campaign in the municipal elections of May 2016 are empowering, and may strengthen future mobilizations and yield more substantive opportunities for political change. For the first time, twenty-five years after the civil war, one may carefully start imagining a political horizon that is not dominated by warlords-turned-political-elites. The journey is, however, quite arduous and requires extensive and relentless efforts, which may be interrupted by an entrenched political and economic order that will not forego its dominance.



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*POWER2YOUTH is a research project aimed at offering a critical understanding of youth in the South East Mediterranean (SEM) region through a comprehensive interdisciplinary, multi-level and gender sensitive approach. By combining the economic, political and socio-cultural spheres and a macro (policy/institutional), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) level analysis, POWER2YOUTH explores the root causes and complex dynamics of the processes of youth exclusion and inclusion in the labour market and civic/political life, while investigating the potentially transformative effect of youth collective and individual agency. The project has a cross-national comparative design with the case studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Turkey. POWER2YOUTH's participants are 13 research and academic institutions based in the EU member states, Norway, Switzerland and South East Mediterranean (SEM) countries. The project is mainly funded under the European Union's 7th Framework Programme.*

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