At the National Museum of Beirut, built during the French Mandate, glass-encased objects lead visitors through a telling of the city’s ancient geopolitics, one focused on a chronology of conquerors and empires. Beginning with the Bronze and Stone Ages, the museum charts the city’s role as a maritime coastal trading post during Canaanite, Hellenistic, Phoenician, Roman, Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Crusader, and Mamluk eras, creating what art historian Heghnar Watenpaugh calls an “invented tradition of cosmopolitanism as a national trait” (2004, 200). But on my visit to the museum, another more lively account of Beirut as a Mediterranean “crossroads of civilizations” was also visible. Upon entering, I encountered fifty or more schoolgirls in their early teens. Dressed in hijabs and olive green ‘abaya—an Islamic garment that covers the length of the body—the girls were excitedly hurrying around the place in groups of twos and threes. They would stop in front of a display case or figure for only a brief second before shuffling off to another down the corridor, chirping and giggling while en route. I asked two of them what school they attended, and they told me that it was near the airport in Dahiya, the predominantly Shi’i Muslim southern suburbs of Beirut. Heading up the stairs to the second floor, I passed a nun in a blue habit and children in school uniforms, ostensibly students from a Catholic school. Upstairs, I came upon another group: boys wearing t-shirts and sneakers with a type of baggy black pants (shirwal) and white cap (tarboush) that is the traditional attire of Druze males, a religious minority community in Lebanon.
While both depict a city vibrant with diversity, the antiquities told of an ancient “before” whereas the schoolchildren seemed to represent a modern “after.” And yet neither text of the city made immediately available to the observer the painful story about a place that has been made vulnerable not only by conquests, defeats, and natural disasters but also by the coming apart of the diverse nation that Lebanese novelist and sociologist Halim Barakat once argued “was a mosaic composed of several different groups that lacked consensus on fundamental issues” (1973, 301).

When the violence that evolved into a period of protracted conflict broke out in 1975, the National Museum’s narrative of Beirut was tragically upended; the city characterized as the crossroads of civilizations became a crossroads of war. Situated on the Green Line, which divided a mainly Christian East Beirut and a majority Muslim West Beirut during the fighting, the main road next to the museum became one of the few crossings where people could traverse from one side of the city to the other during times of truce. The Mathaf-Barbir Crossing, as it was known, stood at a strategic location along the front and thus became too a site of killings and kidnappings. Occupied by various militias as well as the Syrian and Israeli armies, who used it as a bunker, as barracks, and as a staging ground for shelling and sniper fire, the museum was badly damaged during the fighting. In this way, the museum not only fell victim to the war but also became, like other public spaces in the city, its instrument.

Although it is often called a civil war by scholars and analysts, the war in Lebanon was in fact a multinational one fought by members of Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian, Israeli, U.S., and other foreign militia groups and state armies. Given its domestic and as well as regional dimensions, following Sami Hermez (2012), I use interchangeably the terms Lebanon’s war, the long war, and the civil and regional war rather than civil war to refer to the prolonged period of conflict (1975–1990) that made the country a strategic battleground for both internal as well as regional power plays. During the war, Beirut was spatially divided along sectarian and party lines, and militias, who held divergent ideologies and claimed affiliation with particular sectarian communities, governed, and enforced the boundaries of, parts of the city. Today, more than twenty years after the end of Lebanon’s war, the neologism Beirutization still serves as a metaphor for the dissolution of community and the territorialization of a space into warring parts. Inhabitants of this space, as the metaphor also conveys, are unable to move freely
as their movement is caught up in a geography of closely guarded boundaries that mark off friendly and enemy territories. As shorthand, Beirutization and its proxy, Balkanization, are spatial renderings of complex histories of political conflict and violence.

In this chapter, I explore how the war and postwar reconstruction have shaped the city’s built environment as well as residents’ experiences and interpretations of Beirut’s urban space. To explore the spatial politics of this conflict, I draw considerably on scholarly work that is specifically focused on the war in Lebanon and its memory. During my research, I did not generally interview people about their experiences during the war, although the subject often came up in the context of talking about the current political violence or their patterns of mobility through different parts of the city. In this sense, the war did not frame my questions, but it often emerged in people’s responses.

THE CONTEXT OF WAR

Because of its multifaceted character, it is difficult to summarize the war as a series of precise and delimited causes, events, and results. What I will attempt to do here instead is to outline some of the regional and domestic political tensions that were developing in the years prior to the outbreak of armed conflict in Beirut in 1975. By providing this brief outline of the complex national and regional geopolitics during this historical moment, I seek to displace the notions of inevitability that are often used in describing how and why this war happened. At times, in talking about the war in Lebanon with people in the United States, I have heard versions of the sentiment “those people have always been fighting with each other” aired. This idea expresses something of the conception of Arabs and Muslims as violent, driven by primordial desires, and unquestioning when it comes to their political allegiances. A historicized perspective of the war challenges understandings of political sectarian conflict in Lebanon as both timeless and inevitable. Rather than a story about the timelessness of sectarian conflict in the Middle East, Lebanon’s war was the outcome of a convergence of issues at a particular historical moment that triggered sectarian and political hostilities.

The 1926 constitution of the French Mandate of Lebanon declared it a republic rooted in individual rights and liberties and political and juridical
equality as well as communal rights and representation among the various sects. At the time of national independence in 1943, an unwritten agreement called the National Pact, which was considered the political cornerstone of Lebanon, was declared. A compromise among the country’s ruling elites, it stipulated that Lebanon was a sovereign state, both Western and Arab in character. It divided parliamentary seats according to the relative population of each sect based on the outdated 1932 census figures (the only official census in Lebanon’s history), which counted Christians as 52 percent of the total population and Muslims as 48 percent. The principal political and administrative roles went to the six largest communities: Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Sunni, Shi’i, and Druze. The president and commander of the army would be Maronite, the prime minister Sunni, the head of the parliament Shi’i, and the vice president of the parliament Greek Orthodox.

During his presidency, George W. Bush often cited Lebanon to legitimize the U.S. invasion of Iraq. A flourishing democracy is possible in Iraq, he reasoned, because one exists elsewhere in the region of the Middle East, in Lebanon. What the National Pact reveals instead, however, is the limits of Lebanon’s democracy. The balance achieved by the pact made no provision for making adaptations to the apportionment of power in accordance with demographic changes but rather represented a partnership between the president and the prime minister that was intended to increase the participation of Muslims in the power-sharing apparatus of the state in order to redress the legacies of Maronite, and generally Christian, dominance in the public service. It was a partnership that made no commitment to popular consensus and preserved “sectarian-ness” as part of the nascent nation’s political foundation. In time, the power-sharing framework of the National Pact would become vulnerable to collapse in the face of growing domestic tensions that were inextricably caught up with regional political developments.

In 1958, the National Pact was challenged by a political crisis that escalated into a civil conflict claiming an estimated two thousand to four thousand lives (Picard 1996, 74). The conflict emerged from various domestic tensions including political patrons’ dissatisfaction with the corrupt rule of President Camille Chamoun, popular demands for greater state-sponsored social services like a social security system, and, most significant, the clash between two competing visions for Lebanon’s identity. Post–World War II
events in the Arab world, such as the Arab defeat in the war for Palestine and the founding of Israel in 1948, the rise of pan-Arab nationalism heralded by Nasser’s leadership in Egypt, and the military coup in Syria in 1949, took place amid increasing U.S. intervention in the political affairs of the region as part of the Cold War foreign policy to hinder Soviet influence. These developments produced increasingly stark ideological battle lines in Lebanon between the conception of Lebanon as an Arab nation that should ally itself with the pan-Arab political movements in the region and the idea of Lebanon as being primarily affiliated with Western interests. With the establishment of the United Arab Republic (1958–1961), a union of Syria and Nasserist Egypt, the pan-Arabists in Lebanon began to demand that their country join the union while the majority of Maronites and other Christian communities called for Lebanon to remain aligned with Western powers. A military coup of the pro-Western Iraqi monarch led President Chamoun to call for U.S. assistance in defeating the pan-Arab opposition. More than ten thousand U.S. Marines and Army paratroopers were deployed in Lebanon—famously landing on the beaches of Beirut—and the forces in opposition to the government were suppressed. Although this moment of civil conflict and foreign intervention in regulating domestic tensions was brief, it was a harbinger of things to come.8

Although the 1960s are remembered as the good times, this was also a period during which economic inequalities intensified. The oligarchy that ruled both the political and the economic systems was characterized by class solidarity across sectarian lines. The poor were also a mixed (sectarian) group, although the Shi’a were the largest impoverished community and were concentrated mostly in the historically underdeveloped and mainly agricultural southern and eastern Bekaa Valley regions. With little to no government efforts to redistribute wealth or protect wages and no national policy for agricultural subsidization, an increasing number of Lebanese left their agricultural villages for Beirut in search of better opportunities. In other words, the blessings of this “golden era” were bestowed neither on all Lebanese nor on all Beirutis. Structural inequalities created by the country’s service-oriented economy created an underemployed and disaffected urban population. Between 1967 and 1975 the cost of living had doubled, and, on the eve of war’s outbreak in 1975, the unemployment rate was 15 percent, and 5 percent of the population controlled 50 percent of the GNP.9 In this sense, as anthropologist Suad Joseph observes (1983),
the coming crisis was a form of political and economic opportunity for the disenfranchised and displaced inhabitants of Beirut.  

During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and following the establishment of the state of Israel, nearly one hundred thousand Palestinians fled to Lebanon. Lebanon granted citizenship to thirty thousand of them, most of them Christians. Through the work of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), most refugees were settled in fifteen camps on the edges of the cities of Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, and Tyre. Twenty years later, after the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel and Black September in 1970—an armed conflict between Palestinian militant groups and the Jordanian army—tens of thousands of Palestinians came to reside in Lebanon.

Having been driven out of Jordan, the armed resistance group the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) established its new base in Beirut. In the Lebanese refugee camps, the PLO and other Palestinian militant groups and organizations grew in strength, visibility, and number and began to clash regularly with Israelis along the border. One front of the war, then, had been opened before 1975, for, as historian Elizabeth Picard observes, “between June 1968 and June 1974, the Lebanese army counted more than 30,000 Israeli violations of their national territory” (1996, 83).

The myriad weaknesses of the Lebanese army were exposed during this period. Small and poorly equipped, the army appeared passive in the face of both devastating Israeli incursions and the activities of the Palestinian resistance groups that threatened the nation’s security. The kinds of domestic cleavages and debates that had persisted since national independence, about the positioning of Lebanon vis-à-vis the West, on the one hand, and pan-Arab nationalism—which now supported the Palestinian armed struggle—on the other, intensified under these conditions. As a tiny country with a weak military, a sectarian political structure, and Syria and Israel as its neighbors, Lebanon appeared unable to prevent itself from being destabilized.

The specific event that is said to be the catalyst for the war took place in the southern suburbs of Beirut, an area where both Christians and Muslims lived. There, a shootout occurred between members of the Lebanese Phalange (a Maronite Christian–affiliated party), a supposedly Palestinian armed commando, and a bus carrying about thirty Palestinians who crossed the city suburbs to travel between refugee camps. While even
today there is no commonly agreed on version of this event and its details remain contested, it is clear that this event set off a chain of fighting that evolved into the long war. Once the Lebanese army came to be dominated by the Phalange and fought against the Palestinian resistance fighters in early 1975, more and more Lebanese began to take either the side of the Phalange or that of the Palestinian resistance and to form factions of their own. In this way, the conflict expanded outside of the realm of Palestinian versus Maronite. In her novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, Adnan describes the scene in 1975 Beirut: “Many factions participate in the general terrorism, but the principal protagonists remain the Christian right and the Palestinian refugee-militants, that the former seems to want to eliminate entirely. Very rapidly the combat takes on the aspect of a civil war, and one that will last. The April air is perfumed and warmth mixes with freshness. The artillery booms. The local militia has even greater fire power than the regular army” (1982, 12). The ensuing war had many phases and fronts, but in the following section, rather than provide a detailed summary of its many stages, I offer a sense of how the war transformed civic, spatial, and daily life in Beirut and its significance for the city’s residents.

**THE TRANSFORMATION OF CIVIC, SPATIAL, AND DAILY LIFE**

During the war, political parties and organizations developed into militias and Beirut’s neighborhoods became recruiting grounds. During my research, I met a man who told me that he had fought in the war. He looked to be about my age or younger, so I began doing the simple math to determine how old he might have been at that time. Sensing my thought process, he volunteered that he had been about thirteen when he first joined the Communist Party’s militia.15 “I had a friend,” he said, “a guy from my neighborhood; he was a few years older than me, someone I looked up to. He was killed, and that’s when I decided that I had to fight.” He added that he was Shi‘i, but that the Communist Party’s militia had soldiers from all different sectarian backgrounds. His comment was a reminder that sectarian background and political affiliation were not one and the same during the war or before or after the conflict. In other words, to essentialize sectarian identity in Lebanon, to assume that this category wholly constitutes and defines
individuals and communities, leaves one with an incomplete and often imprecise picture of the complexity of Lebanese politics and the political lives of ordinary people. The groups and militias involved in the war were numerous, and some, like the Communist Party, were founded on a politics that was, in part, pan- or antisectarian. It is also important to note that the fighting was not between the communities in the country, but between militias and armies. Some of these groups proclaimed that they represented particular communities, but this assertion in no way meant that all members of a community were in support of that militia. And, moreover, a great number of clashes during the war even took place between militias that identified with the same sectarian group.

As the nation became a contested terrain, host to soldiers both domestic and foreign engaged in a battle to determine to whom Lebanon would belong and through which rival regional powers it would be sponsored, Beirut’s geography and that of the rest of the country were divided into distinct political zones. Each “canton,” maintained its own network of foreign relations and enforced the borders of its territory. The most infamous of these borders was the Green Line of Damascus Road, which began downtown near the waterfront and extended southward dividing the city into two sides: a mostly Muslim west and a mostly Christian east. Lina, a university professor in her mid-thirties, grew up during the war. After graduating from college, she went to the United States to pursue a master’s degree. She described to me how she lived in West Beirut, but regularly crossed the Green Line during times of truce to play and have sleepovers with friends who lived in Ashrafieh, a predominantly Christian neighborhood just on the eastern side of the dividing line. She recounted how the experience of crossing the Green Line was evoked during a graduate school orientation in New York City:

During the war, I would cross over [to the east] at the _mathaf_ [National Museum] crossing, and, to keep out of sight of snipers, we’d walk as close as possible to the buildings along the street, and we’d avoid being near other people; we’d be kind of moving along the walls of buildings. Then, in New York, at the orientation for international students, the police came to talk to us about how we should stay away from the walls and buildings along the street when we were walking alone. They said, “Keep away from walls, at night especially.” This was exactly the opposite of what I did during the war! And then they
As Lina describes, ordinary movement during the war required particular kinds of spatial and embodied practices in order to avoid danger in a territorialized city occupied by sniper positions. As militias took control of territories that ranged in size from sectors, which were no more than a block of buildings, to entire neighborhoods, the mobility of residents was circumscribed under their authority. Entry and exit points were patrolled by and subject to the will of armed militia members. These checkpoints became deadly during some moments of the war. If individuals could not prove to be persons permitted entry or could be identified—on the basis of the national identity card, for instance—as members of an “enemy” political sectarian group, they might be killed. Hence, “whatever the wealth and diversity of their backgrounds, social status, profession, class, ideological or political orientation, individuals came to be identified exclusively by membership in a particular sectarian group” (Picard 1996, 148).

During the protracted conflict, everyday life was subject to the episodic fighting that erupted among the militias. Dana, a young woman in her early twenties, recalled how the war disrupted her schooling. “For one year I didn’t go to lycée [French secondary school] because the violence was so bad; my Mom homeshooled me. School would open and close all the time. . . . Every night we would just watch the news to find out if we were going to school the next day.” Once, she said, students could not leave school—on whose grounds tanks were parked—because nearby fighting had intensified. “We just slept over there, in the sports stadium. . . . It’s weird to say it now, but we were kids; . . . we thought it was fun. After the war was over, near the gymnasium, my friends and I found a whole room stored with Kalashnikovs.” Militias had used the school to store weapons, she said.

Both the public and private built environments were shaped by daily fighting in Beirut and acquired new geopolitical meanings. Exterior walls of buildings became the protective cover for residents trying to stay out of the line of sight of snipers, and inside these buildings metal vault-like security doors were affixed over the doorways to the apartments. During the war’s worst phases, life became entirely insular, as residents left the streets for the safety of the interior. On nights of bombing, families would sleep in
their hallways to avoid proximity to windows. Or, they would join the other residents in the building for a night in the basement, which would serve as a bomb shelter. The war had a distinctive provincializing effect on social relations as it not only drove residents inside and limited the possibilities for civic life but also broke down trust and associations between people from different political and sectarian groups.

The war continued from 1975 until 1990. There were moments during which fighting would stop, and ordinary life would return—a school term without interruptions, for instance. And then this normality would be cut off again. Sustaining oneself through these many years of violence, the intervals of war and not-quite peace, an existence rife with unease and trepidation, required endurance and resolve. The stopping and starting of the hostilities necessitated just that, the ability to stop and then start again, the strength to rebuild, reopen, to reinforce optimism in the face of devastation. People who had the means to leave the country did, and wartime exiles flowed from Lebanon. There were those who had the kind of connections that furnished visas to the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia, and there were others who left for African nations or the Arab Gulf. In some cases, men set up their families near relatives or other Lebanese in these locales and then returned themselves to Lebanon to keep businesses and shops going in spite of the war. Some of the wartime exiles returned to Lebanon later, in the 1990s and afterward, while others remained settled in their new countries.

Along with the Syrian incursion and engagement in the war that began in 1976, there was significant foreign participation in and contribution to the conflict. The Israeli invasion of 1982, and the massacres of thousands of Palestinians committed under their army’s direction at Sabra and Shatila in southern Beirut in the same year, marked an exceptionally horrendous and horrific moment in the war. The Israeli occupation especially transformed the lives of Lebanese in the south. Many stayed, many resisted, and many left to settle in Beirut’s southern suburbs. Moreover, the Israeli occupation, which lasted until 2000, ten years after the end of the war in Lebanon, brought increased support to Hizbullah and the organization’s politics of resistance against Israel.

One of the militias that emerged during the war, Hizbullah, a Shi’i resistance movement with transnational links to Iran, was formed in the wake of the Israeli invasion and arrival of the U.S. military in 1982. Founded to defend Lebanon against the incursion of foreign occupiers, the group
gained adherents and fighters from the largely Shi'i south and, later, from the southern suburbs of Beirut. And “while most militias either gave up their weapons or hid them in basements and village storage sheds and then transformed or retransformed themselves into political parties at the end of the war, Hizbullah maintained its weapons, with the blessings of most Lebanese, in order to fight the ongoing Israeli occupation in the South” (Deeb and Harb 2013, 39). Lebanon’s long war thus marked merely the group’s first iteration, as it has become, in recent years, arguably Lebanon’s most powerful political group, a power increasingly measured in parliamentary seats—the group became a formal political party in 1992—but also in popular support both from and also beyond the nation’s Shi'i community, in growing institutional and charitable activities in areas such as media, in social welfare services, and in urban development, as well as in military might and acuity, as demonstrated in the summer 2006 war with Israel.

According to the most reliable statistics, around ninety thousand people lost their lives during the war, with tens of thousands kidnapped or disappeared and assumed dead, nearly one hundred thousand badly injured, and close to a million people, or two-thirds of the Lebanese population, displaced. But figures like these are cold and abstract and in fact do little to convey the injuries, devastation, and suffering of war. I had interviewed May, a woman in her fifties, several times before she raised the topic of the war. When talking about how she keeps in touch with her adult daughter in Europe mainly by e-mail, she added, “I don’t like talking that way, by e-mail, because I can’t sit in front of a computer screen for very long. I don’t know why, it must be from the war, but I can’t concentrate for long anymore. . . . I get anxious.” This is just one example of how the suffering and violence of war endure in people’s bodies and souls long after the fighting has ceased. As the central theater of the war, Beirut was physically devastated after fifteen years of conflict, and the city’s postwar recovery has been an uneven project of physical as well as national reconstruction.

“THEY HAVE REBUILT THE STONES,
BUT THEY HAVE NOT REBUILT THE PEOPLE”

After the Lebanese experienced one of the most deadly phases of the war in the late 1980s, an Arab League initiative, backed by the United States,
brokered a ceasefire in Lebanon and organized a meeting of the Lebanese parliamentarians in the city of Ta’if in Saudi Arabia. After a month of deliberations, they agreed upon a Document of National Understanding known as the Ta’if Accord. The accord reproduced the sectarian system but changed the distribution of parliamentary seats, which had been divided on a 6-to-5 ratio of Christians to Muslims since 1943, by establishing parity between the two groups and further subdividing among sects based on their estimated population size. Sectarian quotas were abolished in civil service posts, the judiciary, the army, and the police, with the exception of the general directors of ministries, where parity and rotation were to be applied so that these positions would not be reserved to a fixed sect. Essentially, the war’s end brought the restoration of civil order, the reestablishment of a central government, and the disarming and disbanding of militias, but militia members were in fact absorbed into the army and police force and the sectarian framework of the political structure was preserved.

Unlike other postconflict nations, Lebanon did not undergo any kind of officially sanctioned truth and reconciliation process; as an alternative, the government issued in March 1991 a general amnesty for war crimes that was intended to move the nation forward and away from the war. Moreover, because so many of the leading postwar political figures both within and outside of government were active protagonists and participants in the war, they had little interest in launching an inquiry into the nation’s violent past, and none have accepted personal responsibility for any suffering or misdeeds. This official politics of forgetting is also demonstrated by school history textbooks that stop narrating the nation’s history in 1946, with the withdrawal of the last French troops. In short, a telling of Lebanon’s war, at least in any official capacity, has not yet taken place.

Although some Lebanese emphasize the need for collective forgetfulness by stressing that delving into the past drains the energy and resources necessary for building a new civic order, others, like cultural and literary critic Saree Makdisi, argue that the “general reluctance to engage systematically with the war and embark on a collective historical project to digest and process its memories and images is partly a matter of public policy and partly a matter of a widespread popular will to deny” (2006, 204). However, by arguing that an absence of what he calls “memory culture” at the state level does not tell the full story of how Lebanese have engaged in the work
of remembering the long war, Sune Haugbolle (2010) provides a critique of this notion of collective amnesia. His research highlights instead the ways in which Lebanese “memory makers”—artists, intellectuals, architects, and the like—have worked against the state-level processes of amnesia about the war through their cultural production.25

At a more everyday level, the phrase “they’ve rebuilt the stones but they have not rebuilt the people,”26 which several of my respondents used, registers a popularly held sentiment about the power holders’ attention to rebuilding infrastructure and reviving the economy rather than to the postwar project of social repair; that is, Beirutis understand well that the charged social and political landscape of the present reflects the damage done by a recent and volatile past, in which war was waged not only by foreign armies but also by “intimate enemies” (Theidon 2013, xiii): neighbors, co-workers, and friends. As the saying about the stones suggests, a social recovery involving a collective—and state-sponsored—reckoning with the war’s past among these intimate enemies has yet to occur.

“WHY LIVE WITH GHOSTS?”

For ten years after the war’s end, the physical presence of Syrian army troops, not withdrawn from Beirut and its surrounding areas to the eastern Bekaa Valley region along the Syrian border until 2000 (and later from Lebanon entirely in 2005), was a reminder of the enduring Syrian influence over Lebanon.27

On a bright and cool early spring morning in 2006, I walked with Hania, a mother of two in her early forties, uphill along the Corniche seaside boardwalk in Raouché. Off to the side of the walkway was an empty patch of overgrown grassy land where a family with young children was picking yellow wildflowers. In this high-rent part of the city, known for its upscale apartment buildings, luxury hotels, and cliff-side cafes, it was unusual to see an undeveloped no-man’s land. In contrast to the idyllic scene of children frolicking in the wildflowers was rusted barbed wire around the area’s perimeter and a wooden guard booth. Hania told me that that the area had been a Syrian army position. “It’s strange seeing this place empty,” she said; “for so long I had gotten used to seeing a Syrian soldier here.” We talked about how much had changed in just one year’s time, with the full withdrawal of the
Syrian army from Lebanon in 2005 after nearly thirty years, and she commented that “Hariri’s assassination changed everything; they [the Syrians] would have been here for another thirty years. . . . But now they really need to do something with this land right here; they need to change things now that the Syrians are gone.” After a pause, she added, “Why live with ghosts?”

Across the physical landscape of this wounded city, ghosts of Lebanon’s war do indeed remain. Buildings with bullet and shell holes are a part of the everyday geography, especially in neighborhoods near the Green Line, where fighting was most intense. A badly damaged and hollowed out Holiday Inn that was used as a staging ground for fierce battles during the first years of the war still sits just behind, and in juxtaposition with, the five-star luxury Phoenicia Hotel, which overlooks the Mediterranean. In different parts of the city, plaques, banners, and images commemorate the “martyrdom” of fighters and political leaders who were killed during the war. In this way, making one’s way through Beirut constitutes an encounter with physical reminders of the war. These traces of the war configure the city’s space both for those who lived through it—just as the seaside area with the empty guardhouse and flowers triggered memories for Hania of the Syrian occupation in the city—and for the youth generation who have no firsthand memories of the war but nonetheless live in a society where memory of the war shapes both the present and ideas about possibilities for the future. And, in downtown Beirut, traces of the war were removed to make way for a multibillion-dollar reconstruction project—which would become one of the largest urban-development projects in the world—that articulated a particular vision of the city.

In the wake of the war’s destruction and disorder, Hariri, a billionaire businessman who made his fortune in the Saudi construction industry, seized the opportunity to redevelop and reimagine the city’s center. As prime minister from 1992 to 1998 and again from 2000 to 2004, Hariri imagined that Beirut could become a “Hong Kong of the Mediterranean”—a financial and service center that would rival the emerging Gulf cities of Dubai, Doha, and Abu Dhabi. He charted Beirut’s postwar recovery along a path of urbanism characterized by the privatization of government services, real estate development, and the enhancement of high-end tourism zones, all in the name of attracting flows of capital.

Situated along the Green Line, which split the city into rival sides, the downtown area was a strategic terrain for militias and, as a stage for the
worst of the violence, was significantly damaged during the war. In 1977, during a lull in fighting, the first official plan for what to do with downtown was commissioned by a newly established government agency, the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR). The plan was to rebuild the city center along the lines of its prewar layout and to restore its centrality in the life of Beirut in part by ensuring that it retained its prewar character. But the war soon resumed, and later, in 1983, OGER Liban, a private engineering firm owned by Hariri, took over from CDR the project to rebuild downtown and commissioned the development of a master plan. Later that year, and again in 1986, unauthorized demolition destroyed some of the area’s most significant surviving buildings and structures as well as several souks (traditional outdoor marketplaces with stalls) and large sections of a residential quarter.

In 1991, the plan for the development of downtown commissioned by Hariri and his firm OGER was made public. It called for the nearly total demolition of existing structures in the city center, required the creation of an island offshore near the port, and made few provisions for property owners and tenants. In 1992, amid parliamentary elections, a series of laws was passed enabling the creation of Solidere, a joint-stock company of which Hariri was the principal shareholder. With the establishment of Solidere, the expropriation of tenants and owners, and the widespread demolition of old buildings, Hariri’s reconstruction plan became “irreversible” (Schmid 2002, 245).

Although its inaugural marketing slogan was “Beirut: An Ancient City for the Future,” Solidere in fact revived the French colonial era in the city center. Reconstruction began in what the company refers to on its website as the “historic core,” which I described in chapter 1: the star-shaped area of Place de l’Etoile and its radiating streets, which had been developed during the mandate period. The buildings’ sandy brown stone reveals tones of orange and pink when the sun hits at certain moments of the day and contrasts with the flat gray that clothes much of the city. Traditional stone arches lead to cobblestone streets, most of which are closed to vehicular traffic. Carvings adorn the buildings and dark wood-slatted shutters and balconies frame the windows on the floors up from the ground level. The area is dominated by retail, much of it offering global and luxury brands priced out of reach for the ordinary Lebanese. Outdoor seating and the pedestrian-dedicated corridors make the area a popular destination for seeing and being seen as well as for families with small children, who pedal
around on toddler bikes. In my meeting with Angus Gavin, director of Solidere’s Urban Development Division, and other Solidere officials in spring 2005, they noted that this outdoor use of space distinguished Beirut from its “competitors.” “The climate in the Arab Gulf,” Gavin said, “does not allow for this kind of urban public space.”

In fact, it was precisely this type of public space, which feels and looks essentially like a high-end shopping mall, that drew the ire and criticism of so many of Beirut’s residents, intellectuals, architects, and artists; they denounced the private takeover of public space as well as the development of an exclusionary city center that reduced individual rights to the city to practices of consumerism and corporate citizenship, as evinced by Solidere’s early marketing slogan: “Buy a share in the reconstruction of your city” (Yahya 2007, 247). Many Beirutis I knew shared the sentiments of Lamia, a graduate student, who expressed a sense of loss about downtown’s reconstruction: “Downtown doesn’t have a Lebanese spirit—look at it. Think about what was there before. It doesn’t seem like a Lebanese place at all. It seems like something from France. It’s only a place for tourists; it’s not for us. It’s for the Saudis, and the Hariri-types, the VIPs; you can’t afford anything there. . . . There were souks there before, real souks, not like what’s there now.”

Indeed, as Lamia’s comment highlights, much of the popular and scholarly discourse and debate about the Solidere project has focused on its erasure of the past and the ways in which the company’s destruction of the downtown built environment was also a destruction of the city’s social fabric and memory. Sociologist Nabil Beyhum, for example, has observed, “What the fighting had not managed to destroy of the urban memory and the national heritage, the bulldozers of those reconstructing the city destroyed far more radically” (1992, 52). Critiques of the Solidere project emphasize how the war’s urbicidal dimensions—that is, its dismantling of Beirut’s heterogeneity into antagonistic enclaves constituted by political, sectarian, and ideological difference—were but a first stage of the city’s undoing. As Aseel Sawalha argues, not only did the postwar reconstruction of the city’s downtown bring about considerable destruction, but its top-down planning produced socioeconomic ruptures that dislocated the war’s displaced one more time, forcing them to create new squatter areas on the outskirts of the city (2010, 132).

The Solidere phenomenon of cultivating a sanitized, uncontroversial branding of the city that avoids references to histories of conflict can be
seen in other postconflict cities. In these sites, urban-development projects have not only played a crucial role in plans for economic revitalization and attracting tourists and media attention from around the world but have also been instrumental in efforts to remake the image of cities long associated with violence and war. In Bosnia, for example, the formation of a new post-war multicultural Bosnian identity has been engendered through the reconstruction of the Ottoman-era Mostar Bridge—also situated along a Green Line that divided the city along religious and ethnic lines. In Belfast, which scholars call a once and still divided city, upmarket bars, boutiques, sporting venues, and must-see attractions like the shipyard that built the Titanic have been developed to paper over enduring problems of social exclusion and sectarian segregation. In hopes of corralling tourists in “new” parts of the city—exemplified by the “Beirut Is Back” tag line so popular in travel writing following the war—that bear few reminders of past violence, developers and planners in postconflict cities aim to signify urban and national recovery and to market their cities as residential, tourist, and investment destinations.

For Hariri and Solidere, the “geographical axis of competition that pits cities against cities in the global economy” (Smith 2002, 447) meant that postwar downtown Beirut would take on a particularly Dubai-like character. This objective—to achieve a kind of Mediterranean Dubai—was both a reflection of Dubai’s rise to prominence as a tourist and business hub during the decades of Lebanon’s war and an outcome of the significant increase in tourism to Lebanon by Gulf Arabs, whose travel to the United States and Europe declined after 9/11 because of the inaccessibility of visas and concerns about discrimination and hostility. This vision of Beirut as Dubai in the postwar era left many Beirutis cold however. For instance, during our conversation in spring 2006, architect Rahif Fayad commented that “we’re not Dubai, we’re not those other cities. We have an urban history, we have urban traditions; . . . this same thinking can’t apply, it shouldn’t be applied. We have a deep history as a city; we’re not a new city, and we’re not a Bedouin one.” For Fayad, the notion that Beirut could be treated as a tabula rasa and modeled after Gulf cities in the postwar moment was less a vision for the future, as Hariri and his corporation advocated, than a violation of the past.

While many of Solidere’s critics decried the erasure of the city’s history of conflict, the continuing and deep divides in the Lebanese political landscape in fact came to configure the space in early 2005. Killed in a car bomb
assassination in front of the seaside Phoenicia Hotel on February 14, 2005, Hariri was buried downtown across from a vacant area known as Martyrs’ Square, where a statue that commemorates the nationalists hanged by the Ottoman Turks in the early twentieth century is situated. From the time of his funeral and for months afterward, a line of people wanting to visit his burial site extended out into the street, and Martyrs’ Square became a tent city for demonstrators with signs demanding al-haqeeqa (the truth) about the identity of Hariri’s assassin.39

As the tenor of politics grew increasingly tense in the wake of Hariri’s assassination, tens of thousands of pro-Syrian, pro-Hizbullah protestors gathered in another part of downtown named for the statue of Riad al-Solh, Lebanon’s first prime minister after independence. In a speech there, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah thanked Syria for its support of the resistance against Israeli occupation. Six days later, on March 14, 2005, an estimated million people assembled at Martyrs’ Square and called for the Syrian army’s withdrawal from Lebanon. On these days, the nation’s two most powerful political unions of the post-Hariri era—the
March 8th coalition and the March 14th alliance—were born. As the spring continued, the media-termed and heavily youth-based Cedar Revolution, which supported the politics of the March 14th alliance, seized the area around Martyrs’ Square as its own: banners, graffiti, and flags adorned the area around the tents. Journalists from around the world descended, and filmmakers took footage for documentaries. Downtown, in this moment, did not remind anyone of Dubai. Rather, it was a space imbued with Lebanon’s enduring political polarization, a site on which Hariri had once cast his vision for the postwar city but on which he was now laid to rest.

NOT YET PEACE

During the war, our eyes were always fixed on what we were sure would be the halcyon days of the future after it ended. Let the war end, we thought, and all would be well. We would emerge from the abyss into the light. Historical quarrels and divisions would mutate into a harmonious and productive unity based on justice. In this vision of the future, I think, we felt somehow that the best of the past would be preserved, the worst purged by our travails. We had paid a heavy price for the evils of the past, and we deserved a better world. But the future is now, and it is a hard reality, shorn of these illusions. There was to be no reward, after all, for the suffering. (Makdisi 1999, 257)

Written by Jean Makdisi in 1999 in the afterword to her memoir about Lebanon’s war, these words also capture the sentiments of most people I knew during my research in Beirut. Although the war may have ended, not only did its effects endure, but other wars also began. Beginning in 2005, amid the emergence of the two competing political camps—the March 14th and the March 8th coalitions—near monthly car bombs exploded in Beirut that killed or attempted to kill political figures and journalists. During summer 2006, in response to Hizbullah’s capture of two Israeli soldiers along the border, Israel engaged in a full-scale military assault that affected the whole country but mainly killed civilians and destroyed infrastructure in Shi’i-majority areas: the southern parts of the country, the eastern Bekaa Valley, and the southern suburbs of Beirut. In addition to the more than nine hundred killed, thousands were wounded, and nearly one million were displaced from their homes—one quarter of the country’s population.
Entire villages in South Lebanon were flattened during the attack as were whole neighborhoods in south Beirut. Unexploded ordnances from the war continue to threaten the population.\textsuperscript{41}

The rancor between the country’s two main political groups increased during 2005, worsened after the summer 2006 war, and developed into an economic and political deadlock in 2007. Contention surrounding who would succeed Emile Lahoud as president deepened the rift, and in May 2008 civil war threatened when street battles and the seizure of several West Beirut neighborhoods by Hizbullah fighters ensued after a standoff between Hizbullah and leaders of the March 14th coalition. The fighting ended only after a deal was reached between Hizbullah and government officials. Since the intensification of the Syrian conflict in late 2011, escalating political tensions, a humanitarian crisis created by the arrival of nearly one million Syrian refugees, and armed confrontations in various parts of the country, Lebanon is once again being described as “pushed to the brink” (Mudallali 2013).

Given this context, applying the periodization of “postwar” to contemporary Lebanon must be called into question. Like Belfast and Bosnia, political, spatial, and social divisions induced by past civil conflict are relevant aspects of urban life in the present. But, unlike these other cities, Beirut is shaped not just by a past war but also by ongoing armed conflicts fueled and sustained by transnational networks that extend beyond the nation and region. I thus share anthropologist Isaias Rojas-Pérez’s concern about the usefulness of postconflict as a category for the analysis of societies that have experienced conflict. “Before” and “after” scenarios, he observes, can obscure the specific ways in which violence repeats itself (2008, 255). In this regard, it is important to consider how conditions of war both past and present shape everyday life in the contemporary space and society Beirut.\textsuperscript{42} The shelled Holiday Inn that housed militias during Lebanon’s war, for instance, sits just down the street from where a car bomb that exploded in front of a downtown office building killed several people, including former Finance Minister Mohammad Shatah, and injured scores of others in December 2013. Sites of political violence from various periods of history—from decades ago to very recently—commingle in the city’s urban environment.

Political violence has been one of the key power geometries, along with modes of privatization, shaping the city’s space in the modern era: spatial
organization, access, and mobility have not only reflected conflict among political groups but have also been tools used by political groups to gain and expand power.

In the next chapter, I explore how residents move through and understand this precarious urban space, often with hopes for a different and peaceful future not yet realized.