“The Green Line, you know, it still exists in people’s minds.” When Mounir, a recent university graduate, spoke about the Green Line, which divided Beirut into a predominantly Muslim West and mainly Christian East during the long war (1975–1990), he drew attention to the fact that the spatial repercussions of the war, now more than twenty years in the past, endure. The conflict played out in public space and created a polarized city in which neighborhoods that were identified with particular sectarian groups carried assumed affiliation with certain political parties and ideologies. In this chapter, I explore how, in the 2004–2006 period of renewed political conflict and violence, ideas about and practices of mobil-ity were shaped by—and also shaped—this fractious political geography. Here, I aim to present a picture of what residents’ uses of the city can tell us about the workings of political sectarianism in the city.¹

Like other divided cities, Beirut’s spatial polarization has been connected with issues concerning the very legitimacy of political structures and the struggle over access to governance and state institutions.² In one sense, this characterization aptly describes the events of the 2004–2006 period, when struggles between the two main political camps, the U.S.-backed anti-Syrian March 14th alliance and the Iranian-backed pro-Syrian March 8th coalition, involved competition for power and influence both within and outside the government by, for instance, gaining seats in parlia-ment and expanding social-welfare institutions.³
At the same time, this understanding of the city’s space as being polarized in connection with issues of control over and access to the formal political system does not adequately capture the ideological tenor of everyday geographies in Beirut. For example, in the days following the March 8, 2005, assemblage at Riad al-Solh (a square in downtown Beirut) of an estimated half a million people who gathered to support Hizbullah and the pro-Syrian stance, women at the small fitness center I patronized urged me to join them for the counter-protest on March 14th. The counter-protest was to take place in another downtown site, Martyrs’ Square, where anti-Syrian protestors demanding *al-haqeeqa* (the truth) about who killed Rafiq Hariri had set up encampments. Assuming that I was politically aligned with the U.S.-supported March 14th group, Karine, one of the owners of the gym, was resolute in her appeal: “You have to come,” she said. “We all have to go down there and show them [Hizbullah and its supporters] that they are not Lebanon; we are Lebanon.” In the weeks, months, and years following the two March 2005 protests, this us-versus-them sentiment of rival political ideologies came to prevail over the space of downtown so much that by 2007, as Ward Vloeberghs describes, “one literally had to ‘choose sides’ in order to access the restaurants and retail in the city center; either entering through an area of tents installed by March 8th supporters or by passing by Hariri’s burial site adjacent to Martyrs’ Square and thus paying respects to the March 14th camp” (2012, 160). In this way, while political polarization is not a phenomenon unique to the space of Beirut, the ways in which politico-ideological issues spill over into space and are set off by domestic and regional geopolitical events gives everyday use of the city particular meaning.

I begin the chapter by outlining some of the spatial dimensions of political sectarianism in the city and then focus on one specific historical moment, that of the period of protest in early 2005 throughout the Arab world against the Danish newspaper cartoon depicting the Muslim prophet Mohammad, to illustrate how events can trigger violent responses that abruptly transform urban spaces and create dividing lines between them. Next, I draw on my research with young people whom I define as socioeconomically “privileged” because of their educational backgrounds and levels of disposable income to show that although leisure pursuits in particular can encourage mobility to different parts of the city, sociospatial boundaries that constrain this mobility can also be reinforced during moments of
heightened political tension. Conceiving of these young people as social agents and competent urban actors in their own right, I consider what their movement in the city reveals about the spatial aspects of social class and political sectarianism. To begin, however, it is important to present a picture of the appearance of politics and sect in the city’s public space.

**POLITICAL SECTARIANISM AND BOUNDARIES IN URBAN SPACE**

Although few neighborhoods in Beirut are entirely homogenous in the sectarian affiliation of their residents and very few areas are completely mixed, expressions of these affiliations are a part of the visual and acoustic fabric of the city. For instance, while walking through neighborhoods near my apartment when the Islamic calendar reached its final month (*dhoul al-hija*), I would see colored streamers draped across verandas in celebration of those who have returned from the pilgrimage (*haj*) to Mecca, one of the pillars of Islam; I came across glass-encased boxes along streets in parts of the majority-Christian areas of eastern Beirut that held Virgin Mary figurines; throughout the city, the sounds of ringing bells and calls to prayer emanated from churches and mosques. Once, while in the mainly Shi’i Dahiya, I walked past a Husseiniya, a gathering place and site of the commemoration of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom that is erected during Ashura, the Islamic month during which Shi’a mourn the martyrdom of Hussein in the seventh century. Expressions of sectarian and religious affiliation also take sartorial forms that are publicly visible, from necklaces with dangling crosses to the diverse range of Islamic head coverings and outer garments worn by both men and women. These kinds of sights, sounds, and symbols do not necessarily function as borders keeping people out or as gates keeping people in, but they can and do territorially express sectarian belonging.

As I described in the first two chapters, politics and sect come together in Lebanon as religious sect has historically served as the basis for political identity and representation. Sectarian affiliation is no longer indicated on national identity cards, and, since 2009, it is not required on civil registry records, but the sectarian dimensions of the power-sharing political and electoral structure have remained unchanged since the signing of the
Syrian-Saudi-sponsored Ta’if Accord, which ended the protracted war in 1990. State institutions continue to be under the helm of individuals with links to elite families from the different sectarian communities, and the state’s allocation of welfare resources, rather than being distributed on the basis of need, is tied to both the sectarian distribution in the country and to the rewarding of political activism that emerges from sectarian-based political groups. In short, sectarian identity remains salient in matters of politics, civic life, and even livelihood, as connections to and building networks (in Arabic, *wasta*) with one’s sectarian community and its associated elite families continue to enhance individuals’ access to social services and provide avenues for socioeconomic mobility.

Expressions of sectarian identity in Beirut’s built environment can also be politicized. In 2004, during a conversation about the ongoing downtown reconstruction with Howayda al-Harithy, a professor of architecture and urban planning at the American University of Beirut, she drew my attention to what, in her understanding, was a sectarian dimension of the area’s built environment. Speaking about the building of the Mohammad al-Amin mosque in the downtown area, a blue-domed behemoth of a building, she thought about the mosque as a public demonstration of Sunni identity, the sectarian affiliation of its developer and financer, former prime minister Hariri. “Building it in such an Ottoman style, there are no other mosques that look that way in Beirut, . . . and the Ottomans represent the height of Sunni power in the Middle East. That is the connection that comes to my mind.”

As founder and part owner of Solidere, the company at the head of the downtown area’s postwar redevelopment, Hariri, perhaps unsurprisingly, intended the mosque not only to proclaim his role as the *za’im* (communal leader) of the Sunni community but also as a tribute to Sunni heritage in the region. For Sawsan, a university student, the mosque was overbearing not only because, as she put it, “it takes up so much of downtown” but also because it was understood as a political claim to space cast in religious terms: “I don’t think this,” she said, “but I do know people who are annoyed by it [the al-Amin mosque]; they drive by it and say, ‘They just put that here to show that it’s a Muslim country.’” In this sense, while Solidere was active in efforts to recover the downtown area’s many religious landmarks, both Muslim and Christian, in the wake of the long war—in 2006, for instance, seventeen religious structures were being restored or reconstructed in the
area—the expanse of the al-Amin mosque along with Hariri’s identification with it and his steering of downtown’s development were understood by some as a political sectarian assertion. Just as Lucia Volk (2010) describes in her examination of Lebanese public memorials and monuments, the built and spatial environments are important venues through which elites in Lebanon lay claim to the space not only of Beirut but also of the nation as a whole.

Iconography also mobilizes political sectarianism in the spatial realm as portraits and photographs of political leaders visually inscribe relations of kinlike loyalty between members of a sectarian community and their “custodian.” As a common phenomenon in the symbolic practices of Middle Eastern politics, these images, fastened to building walls, affixed to posts, and hanging across streets, “amplify the leader into a mythical hero by idealizing him as the protector of his community and its sectarian interests” (Maasri 2009, 57). Alongside the cult of personality created by these images, other types of visual displays—flags, murals, graffiti, and banners—mark out political turf and territorialize neighborhoods as belonging to particular political parties.

In Beirut, sometimes it is not even the symbols or slogans on the flags and banners that express political affiliation, but their colors, for the most powerful political parties carry associations with one or more colors. During spring 2005, for example, amid the protests following Hariri’s assassination, it was common to see people with light blue ribbons pinned to their shirts in the style of the red AIDS awareness ribbon. The light blue color signified support for Hariri’s Future Movement political party, the leading member of the March 14th coalition. Throughout the city’s public spaces and along highways and roads in other regions of the country, these colors signify the various political teams and the leaders to whom their supporters profess allegiance. In the U.S. tradition of baseball trading cards, the marketing potential of these associations was seized on by the Safina Group, which began selling, in June 2007, “Parties and Colors” collectible sticker albums and stickers depicting the leaders and flags of the Lebanese political parties.

In the predominantly Shi‘i southern suburbs of Beirut, the yellow and green flags of Hizbullah adorn the streets, as an Islamist militant politics of resistance to Israeli claims and Western intervention in the Middle East prevails over the landscape. Dahiya, as the area is known (literally, “the
suburb” in Arabic), is an assemblage of multiple municipalities and neighborhoods. In the early twentieth century, the land where it is situated was rural, but by 1970 (Deeb 2006, 47) it had become part of Greater Beirut, mainly because of the wave of rural-to-urban migration in the 1950s and 1960s, which I describe in chapter 1. During the years of Lebanon’s war, Shi’i refugees from the northeastern suburbs, the south, and the Bekaa Valley arrived in the area, and these consecutive waves of migration altered the sectarian makeup of the southern suburbs from being a mix of Shi’i Muslims and Maronite Christians to being predominantly Shi’i. Although, in many ways, the neighborhoods in Dahiya are unexceptional, resembling other neighborhoods in Beirut, especially working-class ones, the area is set apart by its population density and the morphology of the built environment. Although, as Mona Harb writes, Dahiya is just another Beirut neighborhood managed “by a sect-based political actor,” by reserving for itself the right of armed resistance to Israel—a claim some Lebanese see as a threat to the legitimacy of the state—the group constitutes the southern suburbs as a realm distinct not only from other parts of Beirut but from the rest of Lebanon (Harb 2007, 13).

In her ethnography about expressions and understandings of piety among the Shi’a living in Dahiya, Lara Deeb describes the area’s public
space as a “mix of politics and piety with temporal, visual, and aural textures that contribute to a collective sense of community” (2006, 48). Dahiya is marked as a pious space by commemorative images associated with the Islamic resistance, such as martyrdom posters of fallen soldiers (which also appear in other neighborhoods) and other spatial forms of sacralization such as banners and flags that mark the cycle of the Islamic calendar, residents’ clothing and conduct, as well as leisure and entertainment venues that adhere to Islamic notions of respectability.  

Hizbullah also effectively maintains its own security forces in Dahiya, and foreign researchers I knew had been stopped and questioned by members of these forces about their reasons for coming into the area during the tense 2004–2006 period. However, in other neighborhoods, too, there are visible forms of extrastate security whereby local residents (mostly male) appoint themselves protectors of their politically sectarian neighborhood, reconstructed generally as a sectarian territory, and question those perceived to be outsiders about their reason for being in the neighborhood.

Friends and acquaintances of mine who were politically aligned with the March 14th coalition, which opposed Hizbullah, were often surprised and sometimes concerned when they learned that, at one point during my fieldwork, I was regularly going to meet with a research participant who lived in Dahiya. In the contentious 2004–2006 political atmosphere, which drew sharp lines of enmity between supporters of the March 8th (Hizbullah and allies) and the March 14th groups, Dahiya, because of its identification with Hizbullah, represented a definitively adversarial territory for the March 14th coalition. In this way, I found that among people I knew avoidance of Dahiya and even negative associations with the area had mainly to do with their own political positioning. But Lebanese are reluctant to go to Dahiya for other reasons. Service taxi drivers would often refuse me as a passenger when I was headed there or ask for me to pay a double or triple fare because of its traffic congestion. Other Lebanese have trepidations about going there because of an apprehension that stems from unfamiliarity about what it would mean to be in a Hizbullah-controlled area.

Once, when finishing up an interview at a Lebanese NGO, I asked two members of the staff how to take public transportation to the airport area as I had to pick up a package being held at a post office near there. To go such a distance from the offices of the organization in Hazmieh, a suburb near the Damascus Highway, I knew that I would probably have to
take more than one bus or service taxi and wanted to figure out where I should make transfers. The staff discouraged me from using anything other than an expensive private taxi that would take me directly to my destination because, they warned, I would have to go through and perhaps stop in Dahiya en route. “I’m sorry,” a staff member named Aline said, “I just can’t let you take a service there... I wouldn’t let my own sister do that! We’ll call a private taxi for you.” When I asked her why she thought I should not go through Dahiya, she said, putting an end to the conversation, that the area was “unsafe.” Aline’s efforts to discourage me from going through the area illustrate the kinds of boundaries that mark Beirut’s urban space.

These boundaries, I learned, were spatial in more than one way, for they had to do not only with the delineation of different urban territories but also with the mode of transportation itself. At one point during my fieldwork, after having ridden on both of them many times, I asked a Lebanese friend why there were two different types of larger public buses that charged the same fare: the red and white Lebanese Commuting Company (LCC) buses, which had a more official feel replete with a machine that automatically dispensed a receipt after you handed the driver your payment, and the less formal white buses, whose drivers were regularly changed along the route. “Well,” she replied, “I’ve heard that the LCC company is owned by Hariri and the white buses are run by Berri.” Nabih Berri, the speaker of the parliament, Lebanon’s third most powerful political position, is the leader of the political party Amal, which is associated with the Shi’i community and is a member of the March 8th alliance, which opposes the March 14th coalition, led by the Hariri’s Future Movement party. In other words, Berri and Hariri are members of opposing political camps. When I asked others the same question, a few respondents said they were not sure who owned the white buses—many thought that individual owners and not Berri operated them—but they too presumed that the LCC line was one of the Hariri family’s bottomless assets.

The veracity of the notion notwithstanding, what is striking about the comment about one bus company being owned by Berri and the other by the Hariri clan is the way in which it depicts the public bus system itself as a field of competition between two different political factions with attachments to particular sectarian communities. This notion of the “sectarian-ness” of the very means of mobility emerged too in people’s talk about service taxis. For instance, when speaking about the routes service taxi
drivers choose to circulate along in their hunt for passengers, Amal, a secretary in her fifties, commented that “it is true that if they [service drivers] are Muslim, then they drive through the western part of the city, and if they are Christian they stay mostly on the eastern side—this is from the war [min asl al-harb]. They are just used to driving around their part of the city; . . . it’s a habit from the war.” Amal’s idea that service drivers prefer to drive through areas with which they feel a sense of political sectarian belonging emerged in many of my other conversations with the city’s residents. When I asked several service drivers while riding as a passenger in different parts of the city about the routes they took, most described adhering more or less to a loop through areas situated on either the eastern or western sides of the city. One driver I spoke with, a man who said he was sixty-seven and had been driving a service for forty-five years, talked about the route he stayed on, which started from Bourj al-Barajneh in Dahiya and ended in Hamra and then back again: “Of course I will take someone where they need to go in Ashrafieh [in the east] or wherever,” he replied in a frustrated tone to my question about driving off the route he described. “But then I go back to my route.” In this way, ideas about and practices of public transportation in the city are shaped by past and present everyday geographies enmeshed in notions of politics and sect. The politics of sectarianism are made public and visible in the city by various means, from the hanging of flags and banners in support of sectarian-identified political groups through the interpretation of monumental architecture as a political sectarian claim on parts of the city to understandings of public transportation as being in the pockets of leaders of sectarian-affiliated political parties. In these ways, Beirut is territorialized by—and the city’s space is made an active agent in—the processes of political sectarianism.

THE ANTICIPATION OF VIOLENCE

What is at stake in everyday navigations of this political sectarian landscape I have just described? For one, talk about politics is an ordinary topic in day-to-day life, even among strangers getting around town. Service taxis, the most widely used form of public transit, nurture this discourse as they serve as a kind of moving town hall in which Lebanese from diverse backgrounds come into contact, and conversation, with one another. Karim, a
student at the American University of Beirut, said he usually avoids taking the front seat of a service taxi if one in the back is open: “It’s just annoying because . . . if I take the front seat, then the driver ends up talking to me the whole time, and always about politics. I don’t know why, but there’s this thing about shabab [young men/young people]: the drivers think that we’re the ones they can talk to about anything!”

Although not all Beirutis are politically engaged, politics, as Karim put it, cannot be avoided, even when just making your way around the city. When Nadine, a recent college graduate, talked with me about her participation in the spring 2005 protests against Syrian involvement in Lebanon, I asked her if she could remember when she first began taking an interest in politics. She looked at me curiously. “Politics is simply a part of being Lebanese,” she said succinctly. Indeed, just as most Lebanese newspapers and television stations are aligned with a particular political perspective—if not directly produced and financed by a political party—the news radio station a service taxi driver chooses to listen to communicates to passengers something about his political orientation even before any conversation in the vehicle begins. In the post-2004 era especially, when fault lines between different political and ideological camps became increasingly entrenched, a taxi driver’s choice to listen to a news broadcast on the Hizbullah-sponsored al-Nour station, the Hariri-led Radio Orient, or the Phalange Party’s Voice of Lebanon, for instance, could set the tone for any potential political conversation in which coming and going passengers might participate. While politics might play a dominant role in public discourse between strangers in many other parts of the world, in Beirut the stakes of politics are immediate and ever-looming not only because of the existence of what Sune Haugbolle (2010) refers to as “multiple memory cultures” surrounding Lebanon’s long war of the past but also as an outcome of how politics regularly change the course of one’s daily activities, and feelings of safety, in the present.

During the 2004–2006 period, when political tensions ran high amid the series of assassinations and the consolidation of the opposing March 8th and March 14th coalitions, even events that occurred outside Lebanon could serve as flashpoints for protest and violence that would, if only for a time, transform the city’s space. After first being published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in September 2005, cartoons ridiculing the Islamic prophet Muhammad were reprinted in January 2006 in newspapers in more than fifty other countries. Protests against the cartoons, some of
which escalated into violence—with protestors destroying European buildings and burning flags, and police firing into crowds—ensued throughout the Arab and Muslim world. On February 4, demonstrators in Damascus stormed and set fire the Norwegian and Danish embassies. A day later, on Sunday, February 5, I gathered with friends for brunch at an apartment in Zarif, a neighborhood in central Beirut, on the western side of the city, just south of one of Beirut’s only public parks, Sanayeh Garden. A friend received a text message saying that we should turn on the television to see what was happening just a mile and a half east of us. We turned it on. Live news coverage showed men running and shouting through Ashrafieh and surrounding neighborhoods on the eastern side of the city that are generally identified—as they had been during the civil and regional war—as “Christian.” Flames shot from garbage dumpsters and vehicles, debris lined the streets. After attacking the Austrian and Danish consulates, the protestors went on to destroy property along the adjacent streets.

From the television, it looked awful. As if Beirut would burn. The reporting on the station we watched identified those participating in what was happening as Palestinian, Syrian, and Shi‘i. The men were thus understood to be Muslim, and their acts were thus defined as anti-Christian aggression. As we watched the live news coverage, we heard cars driving by with loud music blaring and voices shouting through megaphones their support for the protestors. It was uncanny to be watching the events unfold at the same time we were hearing these caravans driving through the neighborhood because there was no time lapse between the protests taking place and the deployment in the streets of those who supported the protests; the two events were coterminous. This kind of temporality, with actions and reactions overlapping and no time in between, was one of the disquieting aspects of the city’s political climate as violent events could spin off of one another very quickly, gaining fervor, leaving residents to suddenly and quickly take up positions of defense and seek out places of safety.

We worried that the violence would continue throughout the night or provoke the young men who lived in the neighborhoods where the protests and violence were taking place in Ashrafieh to seek reprisals by coming over to the western side of the city, where most of us lived, an area still often conceived—as it had been during the long war—as Muslim: “We either need to stay here all afternoon or get home now,” my friend Siham warned, her eyes fixed on the television, “because next these guys [from Ashrafieh]
are going to head to Tariq al-Jedeideh [a majority Muslim neighborhood] or even come over here to do the same or worse.”

We were not the only ones concerned about such a possibility. Walking home that afternoon along mostly empty streets, I saw thirty or so army soldiers stationed in a vacant lot behind a mosque. Their guns were collected in a mass in the middle of the lot propped upright while the soldiers sat on the ground or stood around the perimeter of the lot. It looked as if they were waiting for something. They might have been stationed there to protect the mosque from possible retributive damage or perhaps to defend this part of the city from attackers. The mosque was situated along Spears Street, a major thoroughfare running from western to eastern Beirut. In other words, it was the most direct route for anyone from the eastern side of the city seeking retribution in the neighborhoods of western Beirut. They could come across the line that had divided the city into Muslim and Christian sides during Lebanon’s long war and that, now and again, still seemed to split Beirut in two.

On that afternoon, the near empty streets and the soldiers’ presence signaled an anticipation of violence among city residents as well as the state. This anticipation, as Pradeep Jegnathan observes (2002), is embedded in past experiences of public and political violence. Soldiers are deployed quickly, and residents hurry home to safety with efficiency because they have had cause to do so before. For me, the emptiness that day was reminiscent of the hours that followed news of former prime minister Hariri’s assassination in February 2005, when all of Beirut seemed to shutter in a mere hour after news came of the blast that killed him and his caravan. But the emptiness too recalled Jean Makdisi’s writing about life in the city during the civil and regional war: “Suddenly, gunfire exploded on the street outside, and dozens of people scurried into the café to take refuge from the battle. . . . The street was suddenly deserted. Beirutis have broken all records for getting out of the way on time. It is incredible to see how quickly a street swarming with people can be transformed into ghostly emptiness. Shopkeepers close their doors and pull down their iron shutters, mothers scoop up their children and run, vendors scuttle away with their carts, and after an even more than usually furious beeping of horns, the traffic jam evaporates in no time at all” (1999, 86).

In this way, temporal fields of both remembrance of the past and anticipation of the future overlap in Beirut’s fraught political landscape as the city
is a terrain where residents’ experiences of earlier political violence become entangled with concern about the violence that is to come. Violence is anticipated as an outcome of deductions made by residents as well as by state and privately hired security personnel and can be based on interpretations of the current level of political tension that is conveyed through the daily tenor of news broadcasts as well as through the intensity and vocabulary of political debates by news commentators. These calculations of danger are also made from what city dwellers detect to be an intensification of security, which is demonstrated through, for instance, the rapid deployment of armed soldiers to a particular locale, as was the case on that day of unrest over the Danish cartoons in February 2006. Through this beefing up of security in public space, residents figure out that the members of the security apparatus are gearing up for a potentially volatile situation, and, as a result, residents anticipate not only the possibility of violence but also the necessity for altering their daily movements through the city.

CROSSING BORDERS

In 2005, amid the growing rancor between the March 14th and the March 8th political camps and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon at the end of April 2005, a series of bombs exploded around Beirut. The bombing targets were mainly journalists and political figures allied with the March 14th coalition and its anti-Syrian stance, but some were also detonated in industrial and commercial areas of the city with predominantly Christian populations. In this sense, the pattern of violence that emerged in spring 2005 was one that overlapped political and sectarian identification as both people and places identified with the March 14th coalition of leading Sunni Muslim and Christian political parties were targeted.

This mapping of the space of the city concerned Layla, a mother in her early forties, and influenced her decision making about where and when her teenaged children, a boy and a girl, would be allowed to socialize: “I don’t want them going to ABC,” a newly opened high-end shopping mall in Ashrafieh, a predominantly Christian neighborhood where the Danish cartoon protestors had unleashed their fury. “No one knows for sure where the next bomb will go off, but ABC is a likely target,” she thought. “I would rather they [her children] stay close to home; they can do shopping here,
they can just go to see a movie here, in this part of the city. No bombs have gone off here.” At the ABC shopping center, women’s handbags were checked and men were patted down by security officers stationed at the mall’s entrances, while at the Dunes shopping plaza, around the corner from Layla’s residence in Verdun, an affluent neighborhood in western Beirut, these kinds of security measures were not a regular practice. But the Dunes shopping complex, built in the 1990s, was a far less desirable recreational destination for Layla’s son and daughter, who, like many other young people, wanted to go with their friends to the newest hangouts with the most up-to-date cinemas and retail outlets regardless of where in Beirut they were to be found.20

While Layla set parameters for her children’s movements through the city according to her construal of the potential dangers created by political violence, some young people had a different attitude about Beirut’s geography of risk. In 2006, I arranged to meet Rana, a student at a French-language Jesuit university. At a McDonald’s near campus, Rana spoke about her notions of safety in getting around the city. When I asked her about whether she had changed her routes or destinations since the spate of bombings had begun a year earlier, she gave a remarkable response: “No, I haven’t changed anything; I still go out. But, actually, it’s funny, after something has happened, I mean after there has been an explosion somewhere, that’s when I feel like I can go to that place since it’s already had an explosion. My friends and I feel like, ‘Well, they’ve already put a bomb there, now it’s safe to go out there!’”21

Rana, a young woman from an upper-middle-class background who lived in the northern suburbs of Beirut, was furnished by her parents with a car, spending money, and consent to go out pretty much when and where she pleased—usually, she said, this was to meet up with friends at cafes, restaurants, and pubs. For her, the city seemed not to be mapped so much by the affiliations and outcomes of political sectarianism as by certain kinds of lifestyle practices; she and her friends sought out trendy places that were distinguished by their American and European branding.

A common, if not clichéd, summing up of Beirut highlights its paradoxes: a coastal urban playground abounding with nightlife, boutiques, and joie de vivre coexists with the threat of violent political conflict.22 For Rana and her friends, living with this paradox meant developing a rationale for judging places or areas to be safe. Rather than being shuttered inside by
the wave of bombings, they sought out locales that had already been the site of an attack, on the presumption that sites were rarely targeted twice. This rationale, as a means of asserting control over the violent phenomena produced by political instability and conflict, is an example of the way in which some Beirutis make sense of and respond to the everyday forms of public violence that surround them. And for residents with the means, like Rana and her friends, middle-class consumer lifestyle practices perhaps even serve as a kind of salve for the anxieties engendered by living with the anticipation of violence, as they seemed to do for Mounir. “The thing is,” he related, “we’re not going to let politics get in the way of going out. That’s what they want, they want to stop everything and shut life down, . . . but we want to live, we want to have fun. Even with the bombs, we’re not going to stay home.”

Moreover, for middle-class youth with the disposable income to support regular leisure activities, the city’s divisive political geography was no match for having a good time. Young people who had the money to spend on eating out at places like the American-style Roadster Diner, seeing the latest Hollywood films, shopping at European-owned retail clothing chains like Zara, Mango, Jack Jones, and Vera Moda, or going to one of Beirut’s numerous nightclubs with US$20 entry fees and US$12 cocktails would travel to any and all of the city’s neighborhoods to seek out these experiences with little thought given to the political or sectarian association of the area to which they were headed. Mounir, who left Lebanon for Denmark as a child but had recently returned, identified himself as a Muslim but said he would often go out with friends to Gemmayzeh or a neighboring area, Monot (nightclub areas in predominantly Christian neighborhoods). “I don’t avoid those areas because they are Christian areas because this is where everyone is going out right now; . . . so this where my friends and I want to be. It doesn’t matter that it’s a Christian area.” In this sense, the everyday mobilities of the middle-class youth I spoke with seemed to be motivated mainly by cultural and consumer sensibilities and leisure practices, and these sensibilities and practices led them to cross the territorial boundaries of the city’s political sectarian geography. In the words of Mounir, these were young people who wanted to be “where everyone was going out” regardless of a destination’s political and sectarian identification.

I also met young people who sought out parts of the city that represented a melding of boundaries as a matter of principle. Zeina, for example,
Politics and Public Space

an American University of Beirut student from a family that left to live in Australia during the long war and returned to Lebanon in 1995, told me that she preferred to go out in Hamra (a neighborhood and consumerist paradise in West Beirut) because “it feels the least sectarian.” “What do you mean by sectarian?” I asked. “I mean,” she said, “Hamra just feels like a neighborhood that doesn’t belong to any one sect, it’s so diverse; . . . that’s why I prefer it. I used to like going downtown too, when all the reconstruction was going on and there were ruins. . . . I used to go there, but then that became a sectarian place. I don’t mean it became known as a place that belongs to a certain sect; I mean it became where people go to show that they are a part of this sect or that sect. So now I don’t like going there. I don’t know, when I go out, I’m looking to get beyond the problems we have in this country. I don’t want to be reminded about them.”

As a means of trying to move beyond what she saw as the sectarian-ness of the city’s public spaces, Zeina sought out areas where she thought sectarian sentiments and identifications were less demonstrable. For Zeina, choices about leisure had to do with more than locating the trendiest and most popular spots; they involved locating spaces that aligned with what she described as her “antisectarian” orientation. Her concerns about how to navigate Beirut’s politicized space are not unlike those of the city’s pious youth that Deeb and Harb (2013) write about, youth whose day-to-day negotiations about where to go out in public and socialize involve efforts to have fun while striving to adhere to religiously informed moral values. In other words, the pursuit of fun, for some of Beirut’s young people, involves satisfying both consumerist and recreational desires as well as those relating to moral, religious, and political views.

The urban mobilities of the privileged young people I spoke with, all of whom had been or were full-time university students with the financial backing of their parents, showed traversals of Beirut’s political sectarian geography. With their shared cultural sensibilities situated around a globalized “cosmopolitan cool,” it often seemed that the class, rather than the political or sectarian, dimensions of their mobility practice were primary. These crossings resemble those of the upper-class youth in Cairo whom both Mark Allen Peterson (2011) and Anouk de Koning (2009) describe. In both Beirut and Cairo, class-specific leisure destinations like upscale U.S. and European coffee shops, such as Starbucks and Costa, and local outlets styled after these global chains are sites through which privileged young
people “express and construct their cosmopolitan identities” (Peterson 2011, 169). For most young Beirutis I met who had money to spend, decisions about where to go in the city were thus motivated by lifestyle choices shaped by class and cultural positioning.

In some ways, this was an unsurprising finding about a group of young people whose geographic mobility was a constitutive feature of their class position. Lesser privileged youth—those, for example, whom I met as a volunteer with the Lebanese agency running the U.S. State Department’s English-training Access program for teens from economically disadvantaged areas of the country—had traveled minimally within Lebanon and none had traveled outside the country. In fact for some of the kids I spoke with, participation in the Access program brought about their first-ever visit to Beirut, even though they were from villages just four hours away from the capital. Rana and her friends, however, moved through not just Beirut but also the country in pursuit of various leisure activities from “clubbing” to visiting beach resorts in the summer and ski resorts in the winter. They also had opportunities to leave Lebanon, as young people whose family’s financial capital afforded them the possibility of being approved for a visa to go barra (outside Lebanon). They went for a touristic vacation or a visit with a relative to countries in Europe, North America, and the Arab Gulf. Sabine, for example, a recent graduate of the city’s Jesuit French-language university, talked with me about her and her friends’ study-abroad experiences in Grenoble, France, while Noura, another university student, spoke about having visited her relatives in Canada on several occasions.

The mobility of the privileged youth I spoke with was also unconstrained in several other ways. First, they bore little, if any, financial responsibility for themselves or their families. Unlike laboring youth, whose movements around the city were related primarily to livelihood—mobility that has to do with seeking employment or heading to and from work, for instance—the mobility practices of the young people I discuss here were motivated by leisure; none were expected to be financially independent or contributing to family household expenses. While many were or had recently been full-time university students, they did not talk as if there was an expectation on the part of their parents that this financial dependence would shift soon after graduation. Second, for these youth, both the young men and the young women, the rite of going out with friends, even until the early morning hours, was one socially sanctioned and financially supported by their
families. Finally, their mobility and public behavior were unconstrained by state authorities, in contrast, for example, with other young people, like Syrian migrant laborers, who endure extra scrutiny by the state police and armed forces as they move around the city. In short, for the young Beirutis I spoke with, various forms of geographic and urban mobility were a critical feature of their class habitus: being spatially mobile was in fact a way of being middle and upper class in values, disposition, and lifestyle.

THICKENING BORDERS

In the 2004–2006 period, there were moments, one that even stretched for months, in the period following former prime minister Hariri’s assassination, during which the tides of everyday life were altered by a sense of doom and uncertainty wrought by the series of bombings and the unstable political situation. It was during this time that Nicole described how “right now, because of what’s going on, when I get into a service taxi, I just feel more comfortable if I see that the driver has a cross [taxi drivers often hang religious icons from their rearview mirrors or along the dashboards of their cars]. I know it sounds strange, but right now, with everything that’s going on, I just feel safer, . . . more comfortable. I feel like this person is a part of my community; it makes me feel safer.” Nicole’s words spoke to the fact that in getting around a Beirut under stress, certain kinds of sectarian seams, which are deeply enmeshed and play out in politics, often become thicker.

One afternoon in summer 2010, I visited the offices of an NGO and, as is not an unusual occurrence during the research process, the person I had arranged to meet was not there. Another member of the staff, Nabil, who looked to be in his early forties, brought me to a small conference room and shared some information and literature about the organization. Our conversation turned at some point away from the organization itself as he began to volunteer his thoughts about the current political situation in Lebanon. As a foreigner, I was often told, even in casual conversations with taxi drivers and shopkeepers, that I didn’t understand the problems in Lebanon. Often, after I was told that I didn’t understand how Lebanese politics worked, strangers would inform me by talking about corruption and Lebanon’s status as a pawn in the geopolitics of the region. In this conversation, however, talk of Lebanese politics and society took a familial turn.
The problem in Lebanon, Nabil started out, “is that we do all this labeling. We want to figure out what someone’s background is; we do this even from their name. Okay, this is your first name, that might tell me something about you; now I want to know your family name so that I can find out more.” Indeed, I had observed how some Lebanese posed a series of questions when meeting someone for the first time, questions that took the form of assembling clues—such as first name, family name, neighborhood residence, father’s village—that might help to sort out an individual’s sectarian and sometimes class (through family name and residence) background. I also met Lebanese who did not engage in this line of questioning and demurred when the questions were asked of them. One middle-aged professor had told me that some people thought that these inquiries, by differentiating people into sectarian types, were one of the everyday and seemingly banal—but extraordinarily powerful—ways of giving support to the broader structures of political sectarianism.

Ramzi, the professor, had said, “I refuse to play this game of talking about where my parents and family are from so that people can try and figure out what sect I belong to. . . . In my view, I do not belong to any sect. This is a game we play that keeps sectarianism alive and well.”

According to Nabil, however, this mode of “labeling,” as he termed it, was a way of determining whom you can trust. Essentially, he said, “it’s a form of survival.” But, in speaking about his two “tween”-aged sons, Nabil was more sanguine. As he described it, the globalization of media and the internet, as well as the pull of global consumer culture, shaped not only the activities and aspirations of his children but also their raison d’être in ways that seemed to bring to the fore generational differences among younger and older Lebanese. As one example, he said, his sons were far less likely than older generations had been to take up arms and fight to defend their sectarian community: “My sons see everything on TV and on the internet, they have their basketball, their rap music; they want to go out with girls and buy the newest car. . . . The men my father’s age, when they were young, they didn’t have anything going on in their lives. . . . When the leader came and said, ‘Join us and fight,’ they did. But my sons, the young people now, if war broke out and the leader came and said, ‘Join us,’ they’d say no; they’re more interested in the things they want to buy, their music; these are their concerns.”

Nabil’s comments were reminiscent of the finding in a UNICEF-sponsored report that Lebanese youth “were influenced by the rise of
global youth culture and enriched by the intensive global communication networks and the mass media at the same time that they felt stuck in parochial practices that entrap them in confined milieus” (Khouri 2011, 14). In a conversation with Dania, a project officer for a civil-education NGO, she described these “parochial milieus” in much blunter terms: “I have a three-year old, and I want to keep him away from all of it [Lebanese party politics]. They are all liars. In my job, what we want to do is to create an active citizen instead of one who blindly follows the leaders. For me, as a mother, . . . I don’t want my son to go with any party.”

But how does one reside on the outside of politics in a place divided by both a past war and one people anxiously feel is yet to come? When speaking about what it means to live in such a contentious political environment, which gives rise to occurrences of political violence and creates feelings of anxiety about the possibility of large-scale war, Nabil went on to draw me a rudimentary map of Beirut that outlined some of its neighborhoods. The safest thing for people to do is to avoid living along the borders of the different neighborhoods, he said, because of the risks. “You have to live in the heart of the territory because, in times of war, you need to be in the middle surrounded by the same community. That’s where we live, in the center,” he said as he marked the spot on the map that represented his neighborhood in a suburb of Beirut. He continued, “It’s just safer this way.” His point recalled the ways in which, for residents of places mapped by conflict, knowledge of the geography not only is a way of living a normal life but can also be understood as a matter of physical safety.

Nabil’s remarks about the dangers of the city’s political sectarian geography and his vision of Lebanese youth as being captivated by consumerist desires and global forms of media and entertainment were also striking on several other levels. First, his words told of how these seemingly inconsistent or incompatible activities, of global consumerism on the one hand and the machinations of political sectarianism on the other, might come together, in fact, to shape the everyday lives and mobilities of young people in Beirut. Although his sons may be absorbed with video games and rap music, their lives are also shaped by what their father described as the need to protect themselves in a place where the possibility of the eruption of armed political sectarian conflict and urban warfare is very present.

Second, Nabil’s perspective about safety being constituted among one’s own community was reminiscent of the way Nicole described her sense of
security, which came, during times of heightened political tension, from riding in taxis driven by drivers she knew were from the same religious background as she. Both Nabil and Nicole described how shared communal affiliation was understood to be a site of shelter.

Finally, Nabil’s narrative about his sons’ consumerist-driven and mediacentric lives resonated with one of my own findings about the youth I spoke with who traveled around the city in order to pursue consumption-based leisure experiences. For many of these young men and women, the city was open for their exploration, a fact that spoke not only to their stations of privilege but also perhaps to their generational inclination to be less concerned with—or constrained by—the boundaries between people and place that were produced by the experience of living through the long civil and regional war. For Layla, the mother who wanted her two teenagers to stick close to home and hang out at a shopping mall in their neighborhood rather than one across town that she thought was a potential bombing site in 2005, the war had taken a clear toll on her geographic mobility. “I first started driving when I was twenty,” she told me, “and it was during the war. It was a time when I was so stressed out and my reflexes were terrible. After I got into a small accident, I just decided I couldn’t take it. I gave up driving then. I really do blame the civil war for the fact that I do not know how to drive!” When I spoke with her, she was driven around primarily by a hired driver whom her family also employed as an assistant for their business. Layla had thus established patterns of work and family life that restricted her daily mobility to just a few neighborhoods on the western side of Beirut, and she wondered aloud why her kids needed to go to different parts of the city.

In one sense, Layla’s comments reminded me of the archetypal parent-teenager relationship, with the teenager straining against limits set by the parent. Yet, in another way, her children were experiencing life in a city where political sectarianism was very much still a geographical force but also one increasingly marked by the apparatus of consumer capitalism. In Layla’s view, her children were caught up primarily with the process of consumer capitalist culture and showed less concern about the political sectarian mappings of the city—and their relationship to potential violence—than she did. In short, given her experience of living through Lebanon’s long war, the city was mapped differently for Layla than it was for her children.
Looking closely at the mobility practices of youth in Beirut offers a window into important aspects of both political sectarianism and class, key categories of social difference in Lebanon. What these youth mobilities make visible is a complex set of social and spatial relations, characterized by the privileging of class and cultural positioning, that cross politics and sect during times of low political tension, on the one hand, and a kind of shoring up of political sectarian solidarity that is manifest during periods of heightened political tension on the other.

**DIVERGING ROADS**

In March 2005, amid the heated contention between the just-formed March 8th and March 14th political camps, I took a taxi out toward the airport to see traffic signs that had appeared overnight along the median of the highway. They were, in fact, faux traffic signs that used the commonly recognized symbols and vocabulary of traffic control to express political sentiments

![Figure 3.2. Traffic sign: “No foreign intervention! 1559 prohibited from passing.” (Photo by author.)](image)
against U.N. resolution 1559, which called for the complete physical and political withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon and criticized foreign (read: U.S., Western) intervention in Lebanese political affairs.

While no group took credit for installing the signs along the highway median, their viewpoint belonged to the March 8th coalition of Hizbullah and its allies. Beyond the challenge of crossing the busy highway on foot to reach them, what struck me about the signs was how they illustrated the ways in which the theater of politics plays out in urban space. If the city, as theorist of space Henri Lefebvre conceived it, is a “place of encounter” ([1968] 1996, 158), then in Beirut even a routine trip to the airport can entail a spatial confrontation with the fervent messages and symbols of sectarian-based party politics. Moreover, while political polarization is not a phenomenon unique to the space of Beirut, the ways in which politico-ideological issues spill over into space and are incited by domestic and regional geopolitics—like the passage of U.N. Resolution 1559, for instance—gives everyday use of and movement through the city particular meaning. While Beirut is no longer precisely divided into warring fronts, as it was during the protracted civil and regional war, the mobility of the city’s residents is still shaped by—and also shapes—Beirut’s divided and sometimes volatile political sectarian geography.

In this chapter, I hope to have accomplished several things. First, I have tried to show that political sectarianism is an enterprise that takes form in urban space in various ways, one of them being the marking of territories through visual means such as banners, flags, and graffiti, as well as through the appearance of political violence. Second, while class and status are often understudied in analyses of political sectarianism in Lebanon, I consider what the urban mobilities of privileged youth show us about the complex relations of class, politics, and sect that characterize everyday life in Beirut. In so doing, I have sought to highlight some of the ways in which residents’ uses and understandings of urban space play a critical role in producing the city’s public and political landscape.