In June 2013, I was riding in a service taxi driving along the Beirut highway that heads north from the airport area to downtown. It is an elevated highway that affords passengers a panoramic view of building rooftops. On one rooftop, just off to the side of the highway was a distressing sign of the times: swaying in the light breeze was the black flag of the al-Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate fighting in Syria against the Assad regime.

In summer 2013, the impact of the Syrian civil war was visible throughout the city. The sight of the al-Nusra Front flag, for example, demonstrated the war’s splintering effect on Lebanon’s already jagged political and security landscape, as supporters of groups fighting the Syrian regime clashed with those, like Hizbullah, who backed Assad’s forces. Hizbullah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah had just recently made the public announcement that Hizbullah soldiers were fighting alongside the Syrian army in order to defeat rebel groups who controlled areas that bordered Lebanon.¹ Never before had Hizbullah guerrillas waged war outside Lebanon. These border areas in the east, the sites of rocket-fire exchange between armed groups, became just one of the many violent hotspots in the country that challenged the state security apparatus as militarized factions who supported the Syrian rebels in the northern city of Tripoli and an Islamic extremist group in the southern city of Saida also carried out regular attacks on Lebanese army deployments.

A deteriorating security situation and deepening political divides were not the only effects of the war in neighboring Syria, as the arrival of what is estimated to be, at the time of this writing, more than a million refugees strained Lebanon’s resources.² One service driver put it this way: “The
Syrian war is burning Lebanon.” This was his response to my question *kayf al-wada‘a?*—literally, “How is the situation?” but really more like “How are things going?” All these Syrians who have come into Beirut, he went on to say, “they are coming in and taking our jobs; they start driving taxis that are not registered, and now there are too many taxis on the road. We can’t survive like this.” During summer 2013, I heard many comments like this one about how people were being squeezed by the war. While the majority of Syrian refugees were living in settlements and villages in other parts of Lebanon, many Syrians, from a range of class backgrounds, had come to Beirut and, for the first time, not as male laborers on their own, but as families. Beirutis remarked on how the presence of Syrians was contributing to climbing rents, to increased competition for jobs, and to a palpable sense of crowdedness in the very few free public spaces that city residents could call their own. On the streets of the city, Syrian license plates on private cars from areas roiled by war—Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Damascus—were a common sight. In this sense, the Syrian war and catastrophic humanitarian situation it has produced have placed both Syrians and Lebanese who live and work in Beirut and elsewhere in the country in an increasingly insecure position as they have had to forge lives amid a contentious and violent political-economic landscape.

**MOBILITY AND THE UNEVENNESS OF CITIZENSHIP**

What struck me about the service driver’s plaintive statement—“we can’t survive like this”—was how it recalled stories about experiences of mobility that I had heard throughout my research, stories that form the core of this book. For my respondents, getting around Beirut meant having to confront and cope with the effects and conditions of a volatile geopolitics that is both domestic and regional. In summer 2013, the mobility situation was plainly evident, as traffic congestion intensified as a result of the influx of cars owned by the city’s new Syrian residents and of sudden road closures established in response to the tides of political events and activities. One quiet Sunday morning in June, for instance, on my way from the east to the west side of the city, I encountered an army blockade surrounding the downtown area; it had been set up in anticipation of demonstrations against Hizbullah’s participation in the Syrian civil war. These kinds of
sudden road closures not only changed routes of travel, they instantiated in public space the proximity of danger and the possibility of urban warfare. For the service driver, whose livelihood depends on the rate at which he makes his way through the city streets, these traffic problems posed another kind of threat, as they raised the specter of the inability to make ends meet. In these different ways, as my ethnography has shown, the field of mobility is central to the experience of urban citizenship in Beirut.

So, what does mobility tell us about what it means to be a citizen in this place? For one, it tells us something about the role inequalities in spatial access and movement play in producing an uneven citizenship. In my research, I found that residents of the city understood movement through public space as a context in which class and status were thickly written. The privileged and the well-connected were understood to be able to buy off police, for example, and the secured—and sometimes itinerant—enclaves of VIPs intensified processes of “elitization” in the city by stripping away, sidewalk by sidewalk, more public space from the public. The realm of mobility, in this sense, exposed some of the inequalities that constituted the city itself. Mobility was also an arena through which the workings of political sectarianism were produced as the city’s political sectarian geography shaped, and was also shaped by, experiences and understandings of spatial movement. Feelings of safety and unsafety that had to do with the city’s political sectarian territorialization—a territorialization marked by a multilayered temporality of conflict comprising the past, the present, and the anticipated future—emerged in stories people told about which routes they and their children would and would not take. Mobility, as I have illustrated, played a critical role in differentiating residents from one another not just by class and status but also by political affiliation.

By focusing on the ways in which mobility and spatial access produce an uneven urban citizenship in Beirut, I have taken a different path from that traversed by much of the scholarship on the city’s social and political geography, which emphasizes how sectarianism has configured, divided, and otherwise shaped the experience of space and place not just in Beirut but in Lebanon as a whole. Without question, sectarian difference is vital to any understanding of the social constitution of space in Beirut, and yet, as I have shown, it offers us only one lens on this process. By providing insight into the ways in which class and status configure how people live and move through the city, I have aimed to contribute to studies of the Middle East
that address the significance of social class in urban life through a perspective that goes beyond a focus on consumption practices and ideas of modernity and draws our attention instead to the ways in which class and status are enacted in the civic and public realm of the streets.

ENCOUNTERING THE STATE

The stories about and experiences of moving through the city I have traced in this book also tell us something about the relationship between citizens and the state. In my conversations with Beirutis about traffic and mobility, the abstract category of “the state” was used by people in everyday parlance, but there was also a particular idea of the state, as an entity of government endowed with the responsibility of securing its citizens in the public realm, that emerged as salient. A lack of state regulation of the chaos on the roads led to an excessive number of accidents and injuries, many pointed out, and practices of going around and above the law—purchasing driver’s licenses, for example—have riddled the state with corruption. In short, Beirutis framed the lack of road safety and the arena of mobility more generally through references to the state. In this way, in my research, I found support for anthropologist Begoña Aretxaga’s argument (2003, 395) about the staying power of the state. While processes of neoliberal capitalist globalization have eroded many functions of the state, she argued, the state remains a crucial social and political presence. In Beirut, everyday mobility, as I have demonstrated in this book, was an important discursive context not only through which people registered civic concerns about the state that is but also through which the resources and powers of the state that could be were imagined.

Notions of being unprotected by the state also emerged in the ways both civilians and the police described the traffic situation using the phrase ma fi dowla (there is no state). This expression of statelessness conveyed an unmistakable cynicism about the state. But something more than cynicism framed the structure of feeling toward the Lebanese state among my respondents. Amid, and also as a consequence of, an unstable and insecure postwar climate characterized by the devastation of war with Israel in summer 2006, ongoing electricity shortages, the continual sparring of transnationally backed internal political groups, and the flowing over of conflict from the Syrian war, I heard in the cynical remarks about there not being a state aspirations for one that worked differently and that offered security
and protection for its citizens. The ill-functioning state that citizens did not feel protected by on the roads is the same one that could not claim or even pretend to protect city dwellers from other kinds of vulnerabilities: the threat of regional war, for instance, as well as economic and health-related insecurities associated with soaring rents, a limited social safety net, and a lack of environmental policies aimed at reducing increasing rates of pollution (Fawaz, Harb, and Gharbieh, 2012, 180).

Through my discussion of spatial mobility as a social and discursive register through which Beirutis map out their experiences and understandings of the state, I have sought to take seriously people’s sentiments about feeling unprotected by the state. In doing so, I have made conceptions about the weakness of the Lebanese state the basis of my analysis rather than the concluding point, which is often the case in academic and policy discourse that relies on the paradigm of the “weak,” “failed,” or “fragile” state in the examination of Lebanon. In light of Philip Abrams’s call to demystify the idea of the state, my ethnography of the embodied labor of the traffic police shows the state in its nitty-gritty details as a set of practices and efforts that are undertaken by a multiplicity of actors in everyday ways. The perspective of the state I have provided is thus one that considers state governance to be a multifaceted human and social enterprise instead of a coherent and autonomous entity. This is a public and spatial enterprise comprised, for example, of traffic policemen at intersections, patrols set up to catch helmetless motor-scooter drivers, and, sometimes, the direct on-the-ground actions of leaders like Interior Minister Ziad Baroud, who once physically removed illegal barriers that impeded traffic flow in the downtown area.

**MOVING THROUGH THE INSECURE CITY**

Theorist of space Henri Lefebvre conceived of the city as the site of encounter par excellence, a place where different kinds of people not only interact but where certain kinds of collectivities might be formed. As my ethnography has shown, the experience of being mobile in the city is central to this encounter. In their mobility experiences, drivers, walkers, and passengers in Beirut navigated the city’s class, political, and militarized geography through encounters with traffic police, roadside displays of party politics, and each other. These prosaic scenes of getting around the city, I have
argued, are in fact sites of uncommon civic significance that produce—and in turn are produced by—urban citizenship in a place where and a time when everyday life is framed by intersecting forms of insecurity. By focusing on the physical movement of people through urban space, I have provided a departure from anthropology’s long-established concern with human movement across transnational borders, and I have engaged public scenes of spatial mobility, from rides in cars with student drivers to pedestrian navigations around security barriers and conversations between passengers in shared taxis, to demonstrate how class, politics, and state power are spatialized in the urban public realm.

During my research, I found the constellation of experiences that constitute this urban public realm to be characterized by dynamism and effervescence, to be sure, but also by discontent. Pervasive corruption among the power holders, the private takeover of public space, and an inefficient state that leaves citizens to fend for themselves prevailed in the stories Beirutis told about their mobility experiences. In these stories, people expressed not just criticism of but also disaffection with a system of governance and geopolitical landscape that rendered them insecure. In these expressions of disaffection, captured by the kinds of comments service taxi drivers often shared with me—“Lebanon is run by just a few people” and “If they [the powers that be] want there to be a war, then there will be; they decide what will happen in Lebanon”—I heard the desire for an alternative civic and political order. Amid the fractious politics of the country and region, it remains to be seen how this alternative, and the lives of Beirut’s urban citizens, might take shape.

But people’s lives in Beirut are made insecure not only by public violence and Lebanon’s contentious geopolitical environment but also by the challenge of making ends meet and of coping with concerns about downward social mobility and the lack of a safety net. Thus, this ethnography is also about lives that are part of the broader global experience having to do with the anxieties about being unprotected that characterize the human condition in the early twenty-first century. Moreover, the militarized and secured urban setting that Beirutis navigate on a day-to-day basis is increasingly salient for the rest of the world, as the intensification of policing, surveillance, and security are quickly becoming one of the central features of life in the contemporary city. The experience of being mobile in Beirut, then, tells us about the present in a zone of conflict and also, potentially, about our future.