

Research, Advocacy & Public Policy-Making

March 2011

Research and Policy Memo #2

Fadi Shayya

Fadi Shayya graduated as an Urban Planner and Architect from the American University of Beirut. He is the Editor of *At the Edge of the City: Reinhabiting Public Space toward the Recovery of Beirut's Horsh Al-Sanawbar* 1st Edition. Beirut: DISCURSIVE FORMATIONS, 2010.

Partisan Urban Governance Restricts Access to Public Space

Beirut's Only Park Is Closed

As well as their many ecological, environmental, and cultural advantages, green urban public spaces are the inalienable right of every citizen.

Dating back 350 years, Beirut's unique 330,000 m² park is part of the historical Horsh Al-Sanawbar that once measured more than 1,250,000 m². Today the park is concealed from the lives of many Beiruti residents and visitors. Less than 20% is open to the public—with restrictions on practices—whilst over 80% is fenced off with barbed wire and can only be accessed by special permission from the Administrator of Beirut.

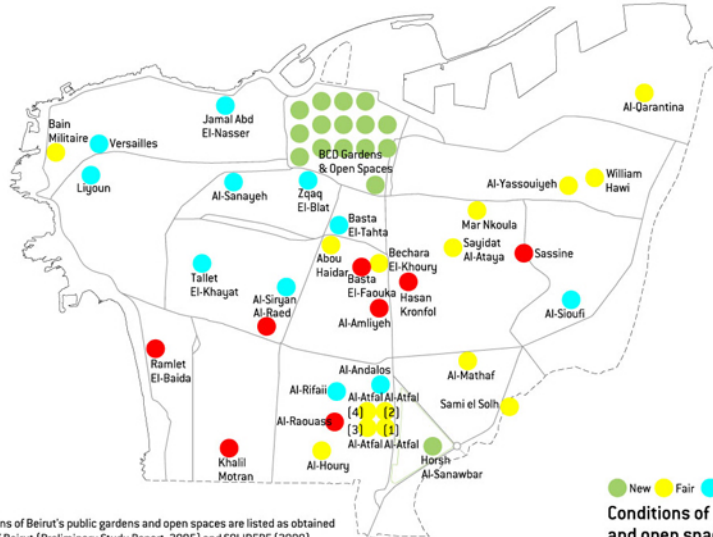
After a complete redesign in the early 1990s—funded by the Conseil Regional d'Île-de-France—Beirut's park is demarcated by the religiously mixed neighborhoods of Mazraa, Tariq El-Jdideh, Qasqas, Sabra, Ghobeyri, Shiyah, Furn El-Shebak, Badaro, and Ras El-Nabaa, and is located at the southern boundary of municipal Beirut—of which less than 4% of the flat surface constitutes public space.

Key points

- Beirut's park should be equally provided as a public good for all city residents and visitors.
- Beirut's Municipality should provide operational public services: park security, cleanliness and maintenance.
- Beirut's Municipality should reclaim the park's historical role and renew partnerships with its electorate by adopting cooperative regulations.
- Civil society organizations and private sector establishments should establish civil associations to aid in park management and revitalization.
- Public and private partnerships should promote new social and cultural programs for the park.

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB)

was inaugurated in 2006 to harness the policy-related research of AUB's internationally respected faculty and other scholars, in order to contribute positively to Arab policy-making and international relations. IFI is a neutral, dynamic, civil, and open space that brings together people representing all viewpoints in society. It aims to: raise the quality of public policy-related debate and decision-making in the Arab World and abroad; enhance the Arab World's input into international affairs; and, enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in the Middle East and abroad.



* The names and conditions of Beirut's public gardens and open spaces are listed as obtained from the Municipality of Beirut (Preliminary Study Report, 2005) and SOLIDERE (2009)

● New ● Fair ● Poor ● Critical
Conditions of public gardens and open spaces in Municipal Beirut

Research, Advocacy and Public Policy-making in the Arab World (RAPP)

The goal of the RAPP program is to forge an Arab contribution to global knowledge in the practice of policy-making. It aims to bridge existing policy-making knowledge gaps by documenting experiences, replicating successful ones, and assessing and improving weak ones. Its uniqueness lies in being an indigenous effort by a policy research institute based in the Arab world, collectively with other regional institutes, to assess and improve how research is influencing policy making.

Rami G. Khouri *IFI Director*
Fadi El-Jardali *Program Research Director*
Lana Salman *Program Coordinator*



Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs American University of Beirut

408 Diana Tamari Sabbagh
(DTS) Building
PO Box 11–0236, Riad el Solh
Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon
Tel: 961–1–350000, x 4150
Fax: 961–1–737627
e-mail: ifi@aub.edu.lb



Issam Fares Institute website:
www.aub.edu.lb/ifi

AUB Youtube Channel
www.youtube.com/AUBatLebanon

AUB website:
www.aub.edu.lb

According to the recently published book *At the Edge of the City*—in which 25 scholars, professionals, journalists, activists, and artists contributed original text and visual works—public places like the park should not be regarded as disconnected spatial products of the city. Rather, the landscape of open, green, public spaces should be understood and practiced as integral to contemporary urbanism, contributing to enhancing human ecology and building better urban citizenship.

Cultures of Governance, Design and Exclusion

Based on the premise that park visitors will abuse this landscape and litter, the Municipality of Beirut reports the official reason for park closure as safeguarding the newly planted vegetation until it matures. According to different officials in Beirut, the park's closure is also attributed to the Municipality of Beirut's mismanagement and lagging capacity to maintain large-scale infrastructure. Furthermore, overlaps in jurisdiction and power-politics between Beirut's Municipality and its Administration result in exclusionary governance and exacerbate poor management of urban public spaces—evident in Beirut's park closure and special access permissions.

In urban agglomerations across the globe, the dysfunctional state of public parks constitutes an indicator of bad governance between governing and governed, policy directives and institutional competence, and the state and its citizen.

In Beirut, public space is neither a priority for, nor an integral component of, the agenda of public policy or spatial planning at the Lebanese municipal and national levels. On the rare occasions when it is, public space is dealt with either as a product of urban design—restricted to formal aesthetics and decorative greening—or as a platform for commemoration—restricted to selected political monuments.



“ Since the early 1990s, Beirut's Park—Horsh Al-Sanawbar—has been sealed from the lives of many Beirut residents and visitors...The closure of this huge public space is a deviation from the norm of modern states and societies. ”

Fadi Shayya, Editor, *At the Edge of the City: Reinhabiting Public Space toward the Recovery of Beirut's Horsh Al-Sanawbar*

The Way Forward

For public space to translate from being 'at the edge of the city' into becoming the center of daily social practice, urban governance needs to inspire an alternative discourse to the current treatment of public space—a dichotomy of the 'perfect social space' versus the 'intolerable urban chaos'. ■



Further Reading:

Basar, Shumon, Antonia Carver and Markus Miessen *With/Without: Spatial Products, Practices and Politics in the Middle East* International Design Forum in Dubai, May 27–29, 2007. Dubai: Bidoun & Moutamarat, 2007

Salamon, Joseph *Les Espaces Publics à Beyrouth entre Spécificités Locales et Modernisation: Une Ville en Projet à la Recherche d'un Nouveau Référentiel* PhD Thesis. Université Lyon II, Lyon, 2004

Shayya, Fadi, ed *At the Edge of the City: Reinhabiting Public Space toward the Recovery of Beirut's Horsh Al-Sanawbar* 1st Edition. Beirut: DISCURSIVE FORMATIONS, 2010