

14th SeSaMO Conference

PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

University of Turin (Italy)

31 January–2 February 2019



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITLE: Urban practices of resistance and contention in Lebanon before and after the civil war

CONVENOR(S): - Rosita Di Peri
- Daniel Meier

ABSTRACT:

The use of spaces, especially urban spaces, has played a central role in the recent history of Lebanon: demonstrations, strikes, protests, sit-ins or even confrontations have been constant elements in many cities of the country and not only in the main ones. These urban spaces, which have been the scene of hard fights during the civil war, have also played a crucial social role because here, over the years, interesting experiences of resistance arose. They had assumed various forms: cultural as well as intellectual, social or political resistance/contention. Urban spaces have become places where communitarian power, and especially that linked to the control of the life of individuals in some geographical spaces, has been constantly challenged through practices that, in the vast majority of the cases, were non-violent. These practices have been able to bring alternative discourses, messages and practices that impacted spaces but also political practices related to these spaces. Just to mention the permanent sit-in in Martyrs' Square in Beirut after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005, or the movements for the preservation of cultural heritage or, even, the practices of resistance that arose during the waste crisis of 2015.

The panel, therefore, welcomes papers that critically look at those practices of daily and physical resistance (Bayat 2012) (to the community / confessional system, to neoliberal planning practices, to environmental crises, etc.) that have emerged in Lebanon especially on the post-civil war period but also looking at their connection with the pre-war period as well as the dominant instrumentalisation of public spaces by traditional political actors.

CONVENOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Rosita Di Peri is assistant professor in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Turin, Department of Culture, Politics and Society. Her research interests are democracy and authoritarianism in Middle East with a focus on Lebanon and the relations between power and tourism in the Mediterranean region).

Daniel Meier is currently visiting Professor at Laval University (Quebec-Canada). He received his PhD in political science from the Graduate Institute in Geneva and was granted with a postdoc from the University of Oxford. He conducted extensive fieldwork in Lebanon and Iraq focusing on identity and through the lens of border politics.

PAPERS:

1. Sheikhs and the City: Urban Paths of Resistance in Sidon, Lebanon

Are John Knudsen

ABSTRACT:

This paper analyses Salafism as an urban phenomenon, with an emphasis on the contentious period following the Syrian revolt (2010–present). To understand Salafism’s popular appeal, it is necessary to examine the paths and forms of resistance in specific urban contexts. In Lebanon, Salafism expanded from its Tripoli centre to secondary towns and cities such as Sidon, where Sheikh Ahmad Assir’s neo-Salafism became a political force and can be classified as a “new social movement”. Over several decades, neo-liberalism had transformed Sidon from an agricultural town and Citrus Capital, to a mercantile city with real estate boom, price hike and urban poverty. Neo-Salafism not only appealed to the urban poor and dispossessed, but also attracted financial backers and patrons who sought to carve out their place among clientelist networks and *Saidawee* elites contesting local elections. Neo-Salafism, is not built on religious credentials and authority, but combines populism with sectarianism. This also accounts for its popular appeal, especially after 2011, when the Syrian revolt stoked Sunni-Shia tensions and anti-Hizbollah rhetoric. The crises in the Sunni religious (Dar al-Fatwa) and political establishment (Future Movement), prompted a temporary shift from “Harirism” to “Sheikism” (Meier and Di Peri), that transferred the moral leadership of the Sunni community from the political elite to the lay town preacher; Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. This also involved a shift in the locus of contentious politics from the capital Beirut to secondary cities such as Sidon and a strategic shift from electoral politics to grassroots’ protests, sit-ins and rallies. Ultimately this led to an armed confrontation that crushed the Assir-movement, eroded its popular support and re-imaged Sidon as a conflict city.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Are John Knudsen is a senior researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and holds a PhD in social anthropology from the University of Bergen (2001). He has authored books and articles on Lebanon and specialises on urban conflict and forced displacement. This paper is an outcome of the Research Council of Norway project: “Hybrid Paths to Resistance in the Muslim World” (HYRES, 2017-20).

2. Everyday Politics of “Ihbat”: activists’ trajectories of resistance and discipline

Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi

ABSTRACT:

Contentious politics in contemporary Lebanon appears characterised by cycles of mobilisation that gather activists around a spectrum of grievances ranging from political participation and reform, denunciation of neoliberal policies, labour and social rights, NIMBY collective actions to cite only a few. These mainly urban and Beirut based mobilisations, have also taken various modes of organisation (institutionalised non-governmental organizations, informal collectives and campaigns) and modes of action

(sensitisation workshops and campaigns, demonstrations, sit-ins, flash mobs, and civil disobedience actions to cite only a few examples). However, many of these mobilisations often appear short lived, and quickly show signs of disintegration; “despair” is often voiced by activists as the main driver to their individual exit strategies. Looking longitudinally at these mobilisations, and beyond “abeyance structures”, what does a thick description of these cycles tell us about activists’ mobilisation dynamics in Lebanon, their grievances, framing processes, exit strategies, as well as everyday practices of “taming” politics? This presentation, looking beyond the structuring effects of regime oppression and instrumentalisation on contentious politics, rather proposes to unpack so-called politics of “despair” (ihbat), by examining internal dynamics of disciplining movements, framing narratives and practices of activists, and that contribute in fine to disciplining discontent.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Dr **AbiYaghi** (Lebanon Support/Ifpo) specialises in the sociology of contentious politics in contemporary Lebanon, with a focus on socialisation processes and collective behaviour, transformation of commitment and logics of disengagement, as well as gendered dynamics within social movements. She also focuses on (re)production processes and forms of social control, order, and discipline.

3. Everyday resistance in Burj Hammoud

Francesco Mazzucotelli

ABSTRACT:

Burj Hammoud is usually described as the Armenian neighborhood of Beirut, or as a liminal space between the port area and the vast suburban extension on the east of the metropolitan area. The existing literature explores the creation of a sectarianized space through practices of securitization (Nalbantian 2013), social engineering (Watenpaugh 2015), and everyday practices of distribution of resources and production of mental cartographies (Nucho 2016). Political parties and religious actors are involved in the construction of sectarianism as a spatialized phenomenon that produces borders and boundaries. The area of Burj Hammoud is however also a place of small-scale practices that challenge the hegemony of sectarian actors and expand the plural heritage and the multiple layers of identity in the area (Jebejian 2009). Political activism centered on workers’ rights and the plight of migrant workers appears in particular as a significant site of contention.

The paper explores this phenomena as potential signifiers of weariness in the fabric of Lebanon’s sectarianism.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Francesco Mazzucotelli is currently teaching History of Turkey and the Middle East at the University of Pavia, Department of Political and Social Sciences. His main areas of research include the construction of sectarianism and the history of urban areas in the Levant.

4. Against sectarian order: youth network Mada

Valeria Sartori

ABSTRACT:

The aim of this paper is to examine the youth Lebanese network *Mada* as a case study of a daily practice of resistance to the confessional system characterizing the political environment of Lebanon.

I have analyzed the peculiarities of the political system and their reflection both on the society in general and on the universities. Especially, they are self-evident into the administrations and also among the students – and it is remarkable especially during student elections.

The fieldwork research, conducted through the collection of qualitative data, among three universities of Beirut allowed me to get a broader understanding of the current situation among student organizations. Moreover, it has been possible to analyze the speeches of the network Mada, its campaign for the student elections in order to understand the role of this organization in a particular Lebanese public place, the universities, which is dominated by the same dynamics of the national political system.

The results of this research and the continuous ongoing actions of this youth organization allow us to consider *Mada* as an example of daily practice of resistance to the sectarian order of Lebanon. Nevertheless, there is no evidence about the connection with the pre-war period. Indeed, secular movements which characterize the political scene since 2010 are strongly linked to this youth network.

In conclusion, it would be interesting to continue observing *Mada* in the next period to evaluate if it will become or not a political actor in the institutional arena against the sectarian order.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA PROPONENTE:

Valeria Sartori recently graduated from the University of Turin with a Master's degree in International Studies focused on MENA region. Her Master thesis is a research work about student activism in Lebanon, pre and after the civil war.

5. Images of resistance and contention in Lebanon's urban landscape

Thomas Richard

ABSTRACT:

This paper aims at interrogating the images of resistance and contention as they appear in the Lebanese urban space. This will be done through the study of films and documentaries that portray the urban space as a contested space, how it has been appropriated by demonstrations, particularly in the case of the 2005 Syrian withdrawal, and during the 2006 war with Israel, with a particular attention to the link that can be made in the use of these images and the visual memory of the civil war. Visually speaking, the Lebanese urban space has been heavily invested with the problematics of war and amnesia in Lebanon (Khatib 2008).

This heritage has made the Lebanese urban space an actor of its own for film directors (Danielle Arbid, Katia Jarjoura, Joreige and Hadjithomas...) who constantly question the meaning that can be attributed to a urban space that appears difficult to appropriate beyond contestation. We intend to confront fictions and documentaries, and explore the way these images conflict or support each other, and how they contribute to the creation of a visually contested space in Lebanon, and participate in its political culture.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Thomas Richard holds his PhD in Political Science from the University of Auvergne. His main research topics are identity and conflictual cultures in the Middle East through the study of cultural products, namely memorials, monuments, and films. He teaches cinema studies at Université Paris I