

Paper presented at the international Conference:

**"Negotiation of Space:
The Politics and Planning of Destruction and Reconstruction in Lebanon",
St Anthony College, Oxford University
Middle East Centre**

Oxford, June 13th and 14th, 2008.

Valérie CLERC

Researcher at IFPO - Institut français du Proche-Orient (Beirut, Damascus, Amman)
Responsible for the Urban Observatory of the Near East, Damascus, Syria.

Summary

24/08/08

From Elyssar to Waad: permanent perceptions and renewed negotiations of space in the urban projects of Beirut's reconstruction

The control and appropriation of space has been an important dimension of urban planning for the last 15 years in Beirut. After war, some large urban projects became places of possible modification of the geography of territories. The context of reconstruction encouraged some political opponents, often former adversaries of the war, to negotiate space by negotiating urban projects.

It was the case for two projects of reconstruction, Elyssar (after the civil war) and Waad (after the July 2006 war), both located in the southern suburbs of Beirut, inhabited by a population composed mostly of Shiite Muslims and dominated by the Shiite parties, Amal and Hezbollah, and both developed in a context of tension between the Lebanese government majority and the Party of God.

In Elyssar, the negotiations led to the laying-out of a joint project and to the setting up of an institutional framework in order to carry it out, a public agency, bringing the different parties of the negotiation together. For its main part, the construction of housing units, the project has not been carried out. In Haret Hreik, the negotiations did not lead to a project bringing together the opposed parties, but came to an agreement about continuing the reconstruction through parallel actions: compensations given by the government, the rebuilding of housing units by the owners, the creation of the Waad construction project by Hezbollah, the rehabilitation of the infrastructure installations by the government. The project is being carried out.

In the political negotiation of these two projects, the main stake, the crux of the negotiations, has been the populating issue, and in particular the re-housing on site, showing the permanency of the themes and stakes around which the negotiation of the projects in the southern suburbs takes place. The Shiite parties' leitmotiv was to obtain that all the population would remain and be re-housed on the spot, thus protecting the identity of those districts and guaranteeing the continued influence and control of these parties on this space. On the contrary, the other actors are in favour of a population modification, which would reduce, even disrupt, the predominance, which they consider to be excessive, of an organised social group considered to have unbalanced the social space of Beirut, and which would

favour an access to the southern suburbs for all the inhabitants of the city – asked for by a government concerned to rebuild a unified and practical city. Thus, they prefer the solution of indemnification, which let the population free to choose if they want to rebuild their house here or elsewhere.

I- Elyssar, strengths and weaknesses of a compromise

The reconstruction project of Elyssar comes politically within a logic of reconciliation between the Lebanese people and of reunification of a city fragmented in numerous community districts by the civil war (1975-1990). This ambitious project seeks to open up and to reinstate the 560 hectares of the Southwestern suburbs into the city. The complete restructuring of the two thirds of the project's area has to provide an answer to the fact that there are irregular settlements.

Between 1992 and 1995, three years of political negotiations took place between Rafic Hariri's team and the Shiite parties Amal and Hezbollah. The negotiations led to the decision to carry out a project of restructuration of the area (infrastructure, real estates and tourist resorts...). They enabled an agreement of the Shiite groups on the setting up of the project itself, in exchange of the insurance that the population would remain on site. They established the principle and the modes of the dismantling of the existing irregular settlements, of compensation for the inhabitants and building owners, and of relocation of the Lebanese inhabitants who want to in new units built within the project's area.

Elyssar's contradictory justifications: a reason why it wasn't implemented

During negotiations, strategies, and decisions lay widely on perceptions. All the actors had a personal interpretation of the situation and of the project, justifying and/or criticizing its choices. But, even when they are widely shared, the representations do not shape the project directly. The decisions are the result of the interactions, within a strategic interdependency background. Within the framework of this power struggle, each person aims at an agreement corresponding to his own interests and representations. Some proposals are the place of crystallization. Some ideas suit everybody. Therefore the choices of the project carry the sense given to them by the actors, but this sense is different to each person.

It was the case for the choice of relocating the population in the area. Population and populating of this area mobilize many representations. At the beginning of the 1990s, the civil war was still very present in everyone's mind and everybody was reasoning about space in a strategic way, even if it was often mingled with reflections regarding a space and social ideal to be reached. The southern suburbs are considered as a territory that has to be defended or conquered, prone to multiple political and symbolical representations.

Many value systems are used to justify these positions. However, it appears that the same values system is used to justify both relocation and compensation, both the fact of letting the inhabitants remain on site and of displacing them away from the southern suburbs. The justification used by the actors — to re-house people in the area or compensation to let them choose to go elsewhere if they want to — is a result of the same reasoning, belonging to the civic system of values (where the pillar are general interest, social unity and solidarity). The difference lies in the fact that all the actors of Elyssar do not consider social unity according

to the same scale. They all agree on the rejection of social division. But the actors reasoning at the country's level refuse the territorial division between the communities. If they accept the compensation principle as well as the re-housing one, it should not be done on the spot, since it would in fact ratify a situation of partition of the society in denominational groups. The actors reasoning at the southern Shiite suburbs' level, are opposed to the thinning down of the community into a series of individuals who would want to free themselves from party guidelines and act in their own interests. It seeks to maintain an existing social fabric and to gain rights and advantages for the inhabitants of the area. This civic logic drastically confronts the previous one since it advocates the preservation of a homogenous population on the spot.

By taking into consideration elements of these two contrary attitudes, the solution retained for Elyssar – the proposal of re-housing on site *and* the possibility of choosing compensation – is a compromise which meets both demands but does not justify itself properly in either of them. Here is the weakness of the compromise and the main reason why the core of the project was not carried out. The retained compromise solution did not fully satisfy either of the two parties, because it was hard to justify for both of them. Thus, it would not have enough been in the interest of either the two parties to mobilize to carry out the re-housing.

A compromise, which is enough in itself and allows other realisations

However, and this is its strength, the agreement concerning the choices of the Elyssar project seems at least as important as its content. Through the only fact that it exists, the project constitutes a ground of understanding, which enables the proceeding of the relations. So that the agreement holds, the contradictions should not be made visible until they are solved.

Thanks to this compromise, some main expectations of the parties have been fulfilled. On the one hand, the governmental party gained the possibility of modernizing and opening up the southern suburbs to the whole of the population, it was able to implement the building of motorways going across the area, and it obtained the cessation of the expansion of irregular settlements. On the other hand, the Shiite parties obtained for the population that they issue an official acknowledgement of the rights of the irregular inhabitants, and the suppression of the threat of being expelled without compensation.

II Haret Hreik: a the implementation f competing strategies

Despite different projects and political contexts, some intersections between Elyssar and Haret Hreik reconstruction projects shed light on the negotiation of the southern suburbs space in the current period.

From negotiation to parallel actions

The reconstruction of Haret Hreik cannot be reduced to the Waad project of reconstruction. This project is the most visible part of a process of reconstruction that also includes interventions from the government (compensations, infrastructures...).

In the beginning, each party started acting on their own: Hezbollah made the promise (*Waad*) to rebuild *dahiye* and gave compensations, independently from the government, and the government immediately announced its intention to take charge.

In the days following the war, grounds for cooperation and negotiation were set up. A public commission was established, including representatives from government public planning agencies and from opposition parties, starting discussions in order to see if they could develop a reconstruction plan for the area together.

A few months after having been established, the commission decided that the government would give financial compensations, that it would reconstruct the infrastructures and that the homeowners would rebuild their apartments on their own. Hezbollah on its own officially launched the *Waad* project and started to rebuild around 196 buildings (out of about 265 destroyed by the Israeli strikes) for which the owners decided to commit their financial compensations to the project, while *Waad* in return carried out the whole reconstruction. The owners of the almost 68 other buildings decided to rebuild their buildings with their own contractors.

In this process, despite a place of negotiation was organised immediately after the war, these negotiations led to a decision stating that no common project would be set up and that stakeholders would act side by side, by taking complementary parallel actions, but not together. The result of the negotiation let a space for *Waad* to be set up, but no compromise appears in its contents. Thus, negotiation of space in this reconstruction project has here to be analysed not in the *Waad* project, but more largely, in the parallel actions of the actors, including *Waad*.

The justifications of a competing implementation

The different approaches of the *Elyssar* and the *Waad* projects, and the fact that the first one never implemented the housing units while the second one is rapidly coming to the end of the reconstruction of the destroyed buildings, could be interpreted as a difference in the balance of power or as a difference in the financial context. But the core seems again to revolve around the issue of the populating of the area.

Everything appears as if both the Shiites and the government stakeholders learned from *Elyssar* the fact that nobody benefits from implementing a choice they can hardly justify. In the reconstruction of *Haret Hreik*, there is no decision that nobody was able to justify totally, as it was the case for the “re-housing or compensating” solution of *Elyssar*. The actions can always be totally justified by those who are responsible for it.

With *Waad*, Hezbollah acts only to incite the re-housing of the population in the area while the central government retracted to participate to a redevelopment plan that couldn't plan to displace dwellers. Hezbollah got what it wanted, that is to say set up a reconstruction project in which the owners of the future units will be the present inhabitants. The government at least obtained a status quo regarding population, considering that some people do not want to settle back in the area and that at least 20% of the population choose not to be dependent on Hezbollah for the rebuilding.

Despite a common interest of rebuilding *Haret Hreik*, which is rebuilding Beirut, each part acts within its proper logic concerning populating. And, as in *Elyssar*, the central logics of the

government and of Hezbollah are, respectively, compensating or re-housing in the area. In Elyssar, the actors did not promote the nodal decision, since it might have induced effects contrary to the ones they stood up for. The project had other consequences, but its core was not implemented. In Haret Hreik, the reconstruction in process is consistent with the strategies and the justifications of the stakeholders. The actors were thus able to act without contradicting themselves. The project was implemented very rapidly considering the scope of the task at hand. The fact that the buildings had already been destroyed explains part of it. But the competition between the logics at work probably is a more relevant key to understanding.