

## CHAPTER 7

# A Line in the Sand Colonial Traces on Beirut's Mediterranean Coastline

Samuli Lähteenaho

*University of Helsinki*

### Abstract

A line drawn in the sand became significant in the late 2010s at a public beach on the Mediterranean coastline of Lebanon. This line, originally drawn by the French mandatory authority governing Lebanon at the time as part of a land registry reform in the late 1920s, gathered new-found significance in current day Lebanon. The chapter starts by outlining the historical shift from the Ottoman-era land registry and property regime in Beirut to the new regime instituted by the French colonial authorities. Then, the chapter discusses how contemporary urban politics such as public space campaigning has engaged the traces of the mandate-era reform, in relation to a widely shared propertied understanding of space on the Lebanese littoral. It further examines how the line in the sand became poetically dense, a locus for claiming space as public or private. Through these discussions, the chapter asks how the public beach (and the coastline at large) became located at the intersection of different spatial logics, including that of the land regis-

#### **How to cite this book chapter:**

Lähteenaho, Samuli. 2022. 'A Line in the Sand: Colonial Traces on Beirut's Mediterranean Coastline'. In *Locating the Mediterranean: Connections and Separations across Space and Time*, edited by Carl Rommel and Joseph John Viscomi, 153–75. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-18-7>.

try reform. The connections and disconnections implied in these logics were derived in part through the significance of the Mediterranean for the Lebanese coastline, but also composed it in the contemporary moment as a constitutive part of regional constellations.

## Introduction

In the summer of 2019, on the public beach of Beirut, a line drawn in the sand became significant. The white sands of the beach, often spoken of as the last public beach in Beirut, had existed there for ages. Over the years, other such coastal spots around it had been closed off due to urbanisation and privatisation. Frequented by people from all walks of society, albeit with a rather working-class reputation, the narrow stretch of sand spread for around a kilometre and half between the Mediterranean Sea and a coastal boulevard. This was the place where I had carried out fieldwork since early 2018, following the work of an NGO responsible for the beach. As always, other lines had been carved in the sand by the waves and tides of the gushing sea, receding in the summer and reaching towards the elevated coastal boulevard during the storms of winter. The particular line followed in this chapter was instead a trace of a land registry reform carried out by the French during their colonial mandate in the 1920s.

The public beach, Ramlet el-Bayda, had come to play a central part in a discussion on Lebanon's privatised coastline (see [Image 7.1](#)). As space across the coast was increasingly fenced off for private resorts, the 'remaining' public beaches gained in significance. Although it was by no means the only public beach in the country, it remained the last free and managed sands in the immediate vicinity of the capital. Set on the southern edge of municipal Beirut, it was located next to a relatively well-off neighbourhood named after the sands.

Since at least the early 2000s, the beach had been officially con-signed as a public beach, managed by a local environmental NGO on behalf of the Lebanese Ministry of Transportation. Over the almost 20 years of managing the beach, the older generation of environmentalists and younger volunteers from the NGO had made it their place, assembling infrastructure, providing services, safeguarding turtle nests, and spending endless cool evenings and scorching days on the sands. One summer Saturday morning, without previous warning, municipal employees descended on the beach and proceeded to



**Image 7.1:** The Ramlet al-Bayda beach.

Photo: Lena Malm.

trash everything put up by the NGO. Citing a lack of permits, they dismantled shacks for a kiosk, administration, and a snack restaurant, in addition to a large veranda. The infrastructure that had been painstakingly built over months and years, used by the group maintaining the beach for their day-to-day operation, was demolished in a mere half an hour with a bulldozer. The environmentalists were left in shock. Years and months of their work had gone down the drain. Some expressed defiance, vowing to rebuild and not let the municipality privatise the beach; one of my interlocutors said he had had enough of the country, and decided to look for work opportunities elsewhere.

A conflict over management of the beach was at stake. The municipality of Beirut had taken a negative perception on the existing arrangement between the NGO and the Ministry of Transportation. Publicly, the municipality claimed their new stance was related to a campaign for improving and beautifying the coastline of Beirut, but my interlocutors in the local NGO suggested that the reason was their staunch opposition to the beach being privatised. The real issue, they argued, was their vocal condemnation of a hotel that had recently been

constructed on parts of the beach. The owner of the hotel happened to be a businessman well connected to political circles of the country.

Intense negotiations ensued. Whereas the NGO tried to reach their backers in the Ministry of Transportation, the municipal officers insisted that the group should vacate their operation on the beach. Before long, a kind of tense status quo was reached. The NGO relocated its equipment midway down the beach, paying respect to an invisible line in the sand. Meanwhile, municipal police made sure the environmentalists would not move their things above the line.

I was perplexed by this situation. Who drew this line in the sand? The NGO was allowed to store their equipment on the seaward side of the line, but they could not be moved above it. What exactly was going on? After all, the sands in their entirety were called the public beach of Beirut and had been designated as such by state authorities.

It took me a while to realise I had indeed seen this line in some maps before, and my interlocutors confirmed as much. The beach, a volatile stretch of white sands between a coastal boulevard and the sea, was legally divided in two. The upper part was surveyed<sup>1</sup> land, mapped in the land registry and owned mostly by private families and entrepreneurs, in addition to a plot owned by the municipality of Beirut. The part towards the sea, by contrast, was public land, designated as maritime public domain. The maritime public domain was originally legislated by French colonial authorities in the 1920s, stating that the reach of waves in the winter set the upper limit of this domain. Consequently, come autumn, my interlocutors were anxiously eying at the approaching winter, their equipment still located on the public domain, below which they certainly knew the winter storms would cover.

In this chapter I examine how the line in the sand, along with other traces of past spatial logics, gained in importance for contemporary politics of the coastline in Lebanon. I should note that it is not my intention to specifically interrogate the meaning of the public/private binary or the concept of public space in Beirut. I treat the concept of public space as *emic*, as it is used by my interlocutors in Beirut, and I refer to public or private as they are presented in the context of the Lebanese land registry, property regime, and general discourse on public space. I argue that, through focusing on the line in the sand, we can understand how the beach (and the coastline) becomes located (Green 2005, 2019) at the intersection of different spatial logics. I suggest that the intersection should be understood both as synchronic, in

the sense of a simultaneity of different spatial logics, but also as diachronic in the sense of ghosts of past spatial logics haunting the present (Bou Akar 2019; see also Navaro-Yashin 2009). The connections and disconnections (Strathern 1996) these logics implied were derived through the place of the Lebanese coastline on the Mediterranean, but also composed it in the contemporary moment as a constitutive part of the regional constellations.

This chapter consists of three sections. First, I outline the shift from the land registry and property regime in Beirut as part of the late Ottoman Empire to the new regime instituted by the French colonial authorities, introduce the notion of spatial logics, and lay the ground for how reforms from the 1920s became crucial for the location of coastal places today. In the second part, I present some ways in which urban politics and public space campaigning in present-day Beirut has engaged the traces of the cadastral regime instituted nearly 100 years ago. I discuss how propertied understandings of the coastline (Fawaz and Moumtaz 2020) form a basis for contemporary urban politics, and how some activists went hunting for traces of past spatial logics as a political intervention. In the third part, I look at how the cadastral lines were contested and challenged both by fencing off the public for private use, and by sneaking onto the 'private' to claim it as public, and return to examine this dynamic at the public beach. I suggest that these contestations were grounded in the way locations become poetically dense (Stasch 2013), understood as carrying significance for a coastal politics.

## A Cadastral Reform in Colonial Times

I was sitting in eastern Beirut, waiting on a restaurant windowsill, when I saw him walk up the street. He waved his hand and smiled, but kept talking on the phone for several minutes. When my interlocutor, the older-generation urbanist activist, stopped, he greeted me with another courteous smile. We walked inside the now-closed-down halal butcher's shop across the street, where he spread out several maps he had printed on a dusty table, and began explaining to me, outlining the task at hand. He needed to have photos of the neighbourhood, to prepare for a presentation about safeguarding a number of 1950s 'French-style' buildings under threat of demolition, as part of a campaign for saving architectural heritage in Beirut. He walked the pen (which I had

kindly borrowed) along the map and outlined edges to form the area for our scrutiny, circling certain plots and crossing others over. Distracted from the issue being explained to me, my attention was drawn to the map. Black lines on white paper, squares with numbers in them. I was not looking at a touristic map but something that I slowly recognised as a cadastral map. Later on, as I was pondering on this encounter and others I had involving maps or other information related to the land registry, it dawned on me that such spatial imagination formed a central way of relating to urban space and effecting change in it for bureaucrats and officials, but also for urban activists looking to make positive change in heritage protection or issues of public space.

Maps are something of a taken-for-granted in urban politics. The way they outline streets, plots of land, and buildings, forms a backdrop and an essential tool for formulating and executing an urban politics in relation to judicial regimes of land ownership. The political importance of colonial land registry and mapping has raised some relatively recent scholarly interest. Giselle Byrnes (2002, 40), a historian of colonial New Zealand, has famously stated that the gaze of the colonial land surveyor was the gaze of the empire. In the context of the Levant, Robert Home (2006) has looked at the British institution of cadastral surveying in the Mandate for Palestine and suggested that colonial cadastral reforms had significant political outcomes, including facilitating transfers of land from Arabs to Jews. In relation to colonial mapping beyond the cadastral survey, recent work by Asher Kaufman (2015) has examined the extent to which colonial-era maps played a larger geopolitical role, constituting arguments for the state boundaries we see in the contemporary Middle East. As Mark Neocleous (2003) has argued, the power of maps is based on how author and interest are marginalised and done away with, allowing for the map to present a supposedly neutral depiction of reality. And, crucially for my understanding, Hatim el-Hibri (2009) has argued that traces of past cartographic practices continue to shape the space of Beirut today.

Building on the importance of spatial logics and imaginations embedded in mapping and the land registry, I propose an argument about the way the cadastral reform continues to haunt the urban politics of the present. Specifically, I argue that the historical institution and reform of land registry in Lebanon constituted a certain spatial logic that has become significant for the urban politics of today. The coastline becomes located diachronically in what the anthropologist of

Lebanon Heba Bou Akar has described in her discussion of contemporary spatial politics of sectarianism in relation to historical master plans as 'The fight over the shadows of old planning schemes' (Bou Akar 2019, 96): how spatial logics of past ages continue to haunt the present condition.

A short discussion of the history of the land registry and property regime in Beirut serves to ground this argument. The contemporary cadastral regime differs from the one upheld during late Ottoman times by the imperial administration in Beirut.<sup>2</sup> In those days, property ownership was not premised on precise identification and mapping of plots. Instead, the Ottoman land registry recorded sales of land between persons. In order to prove your ownership of land you would refer to the sales contract passing ownership of the land to you. Another important aspect of the Ottoman system, cutting some corners and without delving into the details of the legal framework, was differentiation between the categories of *mulk* and *miri*. While *mulk*, land in absolute ownership, was somewhat close to European notions of private property, *miri* was state-owned agricultural land, 'rented out' on permanent leases to individual farmers. However, in the late Ottoman system, *miri* lands could also be inherited and sold with only the symbolic approval of the relevant authorities, thus diminishing in practice the distinction between *miri* and the French notion of private property. According to Ziadeh (1993), this could be seen as part of a longer process of privatisation of state lands stretching back to the modernisation reforms of the Ottoman Empire in the mid-19th century.

With the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire after the Treaty of Lausanne in 1922, which ended the Great War, the French colonial regime assumed control over the territory of Greater Syria. The French mandatory administration instituted wide-ranging administrative reforms. One of these was a reform of the cadastral system in the newly formed State of Greater Lebanon, later to become the Republic of Lebanon. During the 1920s, the French mandatory administration undertook surveying work, registration of titles, and institution of a number of decrees establishing the Land Registry and the relevant administrative framework. In 1930, a new property law by administrative decree established principles for ownership rights, immovable property, and so on. As Hatem el-Hibri notes (2009, 122–23), the cadastral survey itself was commissioned to M. Camille Durraffourd, who hired Rus-

sian engineers with recent experience in cadastral surveys in Yugoslavia, and utilised new technologies such as aerial photography to achieve accuracy. Their work aimed at replacing the former Ottoman *Defter Khane* system with the Napoleonic *cadastre* and the Torrens land-title registration system, to foster agricultural reform in the countryside and urban planning especially in Beirut. (See [Image 7.2.](#))

Centralised and reified knowledge of land ownership was unsurprisingly appreciated by the 21st-century land registry bureaucrats. As the official website of the Land Registry of Lebanon noted at the time of my fieldwork on the colonial-era reform, '[a]s a result of the implementation of the works related to surveying and land registry, estates appeared clearer and more accurate with regards to their area, ownership, or relevant rights'. From the perspective of the spatial logic of the land registry bureaucracy in contemporary Beirut, increased accuracy and clarity were still considered central outcomes of the 1920s reforms. In a related vein, the historian Elizabeth Williams (2015, 172) has argued that the French mapping of the *cadastre* in Syria implied a shift in ways of knowing and governing, producing centralised and reified knowledge of land ownership.

One summer 2018 afternoon in Beirut over a coffee on the busy Hamra street I was discussing the history and current state of Lebanese *cadastre* with a former employee of the Land Registry. The former employee noted to me that the French administration responsible for Lebanon had a very experimental approach to administration of the colonies, where they were free to test and use innovative administrative approaches. Thus, the system implemented in Lebanon was not the same as used in most of France but a Franco-German system found in Alsace during German times and up until today.<sup>3</sup>

Later, I interviewed a director of the Beirut Land Registry in his office on the top floor of a decaying concrete building close to downtown Beirut. The director, a respectful and enthusiastic man, also stressed the Alsace connection, and joyfully noted how he had recently enjoyed an interesting trip to Alsace due to it. He further emphasised that, although there are slight differences between the systems currently in use in Alsace and Lebanon, they are based on similar principles. It is based on unique identification of the plot with reference to a map based on surveying work, and includes a history of all sales of the plot. This contrasts with the standard French system in which the registry does not show the precise boundaries between properties.





ownership of land was divided between the public domain, meaning non-surveyed public lands, and so-called 'government private property', i.e. publicly owned surveyed land.

Another point of importance I learned from my interlocutors at the land registry related to cuts in flows of information. As part of the passage of time from mandate Lebanon to our current age, in addition to numerous legal shifts and adjustments, Lebanon underwent a period of civil strife (1975–1990). Extended wars pose risks to archives and government institutions, yet according to my interlocutor the land registry survived the war relatively well. The documents containing the deeds survived the war well, yet the cadastral maps suffered some wear during the time. One of the measures taken by the registry's bureaucrats during the war was a freeze on registering changes to ownership with absentee owners. This was in order to prevent forgeries in a situation where many landowners had fled the country, and thus preserve ownership. My interlocutors noted that obviously there was still some forgery, but it was very limited in scale.

For our consideration, a crucial part of the French land registry reforms was the institution in 1925 of a decree on maritime public domain. This is the law that, accompanied by surveying work, effectively drew the line in the sand along the Lebanese coastline, separating public domain from surveyed land. As Beirut activists often quoted from the law:

The maritime public domain consists of the seashore extending to the farthest distance that the waves reach in winter, as well as sand and gravel beaches ... and then, those coastal grounds, and waters connected to the sea that do not form part of the natural cadastral land of the country.<sup>4</sup>

The decree states that the land falling under the 'winter waves', the maritime public domain, cannot be recorded in the registry as property, nor can it be sold or acquired as property over time. From the outset, the decree came with exceptions. It allowed for a temporary occupation in exchange for a fee and meeting some conditions (see Legal Agenda 2016). The decree was later amended multiple times, specifying the details for such occupancy to the systematic benefit of investors and the real estate industry. Nonetheless, mapping the maritime public domain into cadastral maps produced a line running along the coastline, below which land is not surveyed and separated into plots.

This notion of ‘public’ implicit in the 1925 maritime public domain continues to carry a central importance in contemporary discussions around the coastline of Beirut.

The significance of the colonial law that instituted the coastline as public domain was not lost on urban activists in early 21st-century Beirut. During my fieldwork, mentions of the domain were circulating widely in activist publications and journalistic texts, and utilised in campaigns and protests (e.g. Dictaphone 2013). As part of the general becoming-significant of the land registry for both institutions and activists, the line that delineates the maritime public domain was part of a very active knowledge cultivated by campaigners and scholar-activists<sup>5</sup> in Beirut engaging with the privatisation of the city’s coastline. This was the very same line in the sand we started this chapter with.

### Engaging the *Cadastré*

Urban politics and activism in Beirut during my fieldwork pivoted to a large degree around issues of land and land ownership. In this context, the colonial reform of the land registry by the French mandate authorities in 1920s Lebanon emerged as important for contemporary urban politics. As the entanglement of urban space, the waves of the Mediterranean, and the spatial tools of the colonial land surveyor had brought about a demarcation of the coastline, lines drawn in 1920s Beirut became important again in the context of the 2010s. And not only in the sense of ‘setting the stage’ for privatisation of the coastline and opposition to it. What is more, the lines drawn by the cadastral regime became blurry and contested, through history.

The resurgent relevance of the line in the sand was related to how the coastline had come to be seen and acted upon as propertied landscapes. Anthropologist Nada Moumtaz and urbanist Mona Fawaz have suggested that urban actors in Beirut tend to see neighbourhoods as propertied landscapes, an approach to space that reduces ‘alternative forms of claiming, ultimately limiting the imaginary of possible collectives and forms of being together to those imposed by the imperatives of project designers’ and strips spaces of their communal, social, and religious meaning (Fawaz and Moumtaz 2020). In a somewhat similar vein, in the context of Singapore, urbanist Anne Haila (2017) has explored ‘the property mind’: the propensity of people to be acutely

aware of issues and prices related to the property market. Such propertied understandings of coastal space in Beirut constitute a spatial logic central to the way politics of the coastline are carried out in Beirut. The perception of coastal space as propertied led some activists to go chasing after the shadows of past spatial logics, the paper traces of the French land registry reform.

As knowledge of the cadastral landscape in coastal Beirut became important for engaging in urban politics, it should be stressed that cuts, uncertainties, and controversies in knowledge became equally important. Even as perceiving the coastline as propertied was central, the knowledge of who exactly owns what, and where exactly the lines are drawn, was the constant subject of debate and circulation of contradictory information. Such uncertainties and cuts in knowledge were not merely a matter of knowing what exactly the bureaucratic record states, as 'true' relations of ownership could be hidden behind shady business arrangements or closed doors of archives. History and law were always and already hazy and subject to different claims and unearthings of hidden connections.

A prominent case of contestation around the public/private divide on the coastline in the 2010s was that of Dalieh el-Raouche, a small rocky peninsula extending to the sea next to the famous Pigeon Rocks of Beirut, located about a kilometre along the coastline from the public beach. In 2013, a proposed construction project that threatened to enclose this bit of openly accessible coastline from the public attracted the attention of large parts of Beirut's civil society and activist circles. Different groups and organisations sprung to action around the cause of defending Dalieh, and many activists, being from academic backgrounds including urban studies and architecture, began researching the history and current status of the site.

As part of this work the activists dug into local cultural history of the site and reclaimed a lost name for the site, *dalieh*,<sup>6</sup> meaning grapevine, coming likely from the historical use of the site as peri-urban farmland. The activists savvily connected this name to the name of the neighbourhood and the neighbouring famous 'Pigeon Rocks', Raouche, thus giving the place the name it is known by today: Dalieh of Raouche. This move can be seen as typical of a certain mode of history in the present practised by urban activists in Beirut, where connecting with local history provides tools for urban space advocacy. In giving the previously somewhat ignored coastal area a name and a his-

tory, the activists were thus making it knowable in new ways for the wider public. Accordingly, the booklet produced by a campaign for preservation of the area starts with the words:

In Arabic, Dalieh refers to any plant that hangs down, typically used to roof terraces where families, neighbors and friends gather to mark the end of the workday. In Beirut, Dalieh refers to a vast terrain that extends from the city's emblematic Sakhret el-Raouche, and slopes gently towards the sea. (Dalieh Campaign 2015)

One of the issues that arose in the ensuing discussion and advocacy work was the legal status of land ownership in Dalieh. The campaigners wanted to protect the site as a public space. The problem, however, was that the land, according to the land registry, was privately owned. One activist in the campaign noted to me that in public discussions they often encountered the argument questioning how they can claim this place as public when it is private property. Under the Ottoman land registry regime, the lands of Dalieh had been state property, falling under the category of *miri*. The Ottoman state had leased these lands for use by some prominent Beirut families as agricultural land. As part of the above-discussed land registry reform after the French took colonial possession of Lebanon, the rentier families of Dalieh were given title to the lands. Fast forward 60 years or so, to the 1990s, and a lot of these titles had been bought by the family of the late Lebanese prime minister and real estate businessman Rafiq Hariri (see Baumann 2017). Whereas the lands of Dalieh had previously been separated into multiple small plots and owned by different families, they were now mostly concentrated in the hands of a family with real estate business interests and the means to pursue them. In this way, the political and economic changes in post-civil war Lebanon had afforded the announcement of development in the lands of Dalieh.

During the debates about the status and future of Dalieh el-Raouche, around the year 2013, Beirut activist-scholars encountered these traces of administrative reforms from nearly 100 years ago. Trying to unravel the history of land ownership and negotiate the juridical public/private distinction took the activist-researchers across the temporal separation.

As the activists were researching the legal status and history of Dalieh, they encountered a thorny issue. With regard to the law on

maritime public domain mentioned earlier, some of the lands of Dalieh, low rocks descending to the sea that have been surveyed and separated into plots, fall currently under the ‘winter waves’. According to the specific wording of the law, this apparently should not be possible. This apparent paradox is a good example of the vagueness and uncertainty of the knowledge circulating about the law. The former land registry employee mentioned earlier was strict on the topic: no one can have a deed or title to the coastal land falling under definition of the maritime public domain. One Beirut-based journalist, who had looked into this issue, told me that the best answer he got from the cadastral officials was speculation that perhaps climate change made the sea levels rise from a hundred years ago, and thus creep up the maritime public domain to the surveyed plots.

The urban activists decided to look to the archive, and try to locate the original cadastral map drawn by the French in the 1920s. According to el-Hibri (2009, 123), the original cadastral maps had either been lost during the collapse of the Mandate or had been taken back to France. In the archive, the activists indeed found something seemingly supportive of their claims. Let me quote at length from a 2015 publication by the activist coalition:

Theft of Public Land - Historical and contemporary property records and maps (such as the French Plan Danger de Beyrouth) demonstrate that property boundaries in Dalieh have been modified to encroach on the maritime public domain, in contravention of the law. In other words, a large section of Dalieh has been illegally privatized, including the fishermen’s port that until recently secured the livelihood of over 75 families. The official French 1926 cadastral map was not found in the official land registry in Beirut. If revealed, this document would act as an ultimate proof to the theft of public property and cadastral forging. (Dalieh Campaign 2015, 8)

In quite literal terms, then, the campaigners had come to the conclusion that the French colonial reforms in the 1920s set the stage for a politics of coastline that continues until today. Since there was a significant suspicion that the property boundaries had been modified, gaining access to an artefact from the 1920s that could be understood as trace<sup>7</sup> would help prove this falsification of property. The activists remained cut off from this knowledge, however, as the *ultimate proof*

was not to be found in the archive, as I explain below. The trace not obtained still carried definite weight in its absence.

I had heard narrations of this story in slightly different versions,<sup>8</sup> but the one I present here is as told to me by one long-term activist in the spring of 2018, about events that had happened several years earlier. When beginning to look for the original cadastral map, the group of urban activists shortly realised that neither the land registry of Beirut nor the municipality had a copy of it. The first step after this realisation was to look in the other archives in Beirut. The first destination was the archives of the IFPO, the French Institute of the Near East. Browsing through the archives of IFPO from the colonial times, some materials were found: there were drafts of cadastral maps, yet no finalised, official version. The next direction was the central archive, administered by the Central Bank. Here, they were met with a closed door. Some sections of the archives were not to be accessed by the activist-researchers, although it is unclear whether they would have held something relevant to their search. Finally, some of the activists headed to France to search in the colonial archives, hoping they might hold an answer to the search. And there they indeed did find something interesting. Not a map, but a summary written by the French surveyor to the administration outlining what he will present to them as the result of the surveying work. Nonetheless, the all-important map was nowhere to be found. When I presented my interlocutor with the surprised question ‘Wow, did you really go to all this trouble to find an old map?’ he replied: ‘Of course. If we had the documents, that would be it. Khalas.’

To sum up: connecting backwards through time by the mediation of the archive allowed the urban activists to stake claims about propertied space and the public/private divide in the contemporary urban landscape. The coming together of the underlying logic of understanding the littoral as propertied landscapes and the connection with the colonial-era cadastral maps proved significant for the contemporary coastline. Even though the vaunted original cadastral map was never found, tapping into history allowed the activists to contest the legality of the private ownership of the lands in Dalieh. Moreover, the colonial link became significant for the Beirut activists in a quite literal sense. Chasing after the traces of a past spatial logic required them to take their search first to the archives of the IFPO, and beyond that across the Mediterranean Sea to the archives in France.

The image of public/private that emerges from this discussion presents itself in the multiple: while contemporary cadastral maps and records quite clearly delineate the plots and their ownership from the maritime public domain, the claimed likeliness of a historical falsification of the property record allows for a contestation of the registry. Thus, even if the spatial logic of the land registry in principle works according to the colonial logic of clear delineation, as it becomes historicised an uncanny complexity for the value of locations emerges. While the bureaucratic and legal logic of the *cadaastre* was by no means the only regime in which the meaning of the coastline was being contested, the contestation was potent not least due to the moral and juridical power of the Lebanese state backing the distinction of public and private domain. The connections and disconnections relevant for even this particular location were thus not answerable in a clear yes/no manner, but through history they became fuzzy and layered.

### Poetics of Spatial Logics, or Sneaking onto Beaches

What we could call a cartographic or cadastral imagination forms grounds for a poetic understanding of urban politics, where lines originally drawn on maps by French bureaucrats come to ground understandings of leisure and politics of space in contemporary Beirut. As discussed above, popular and academic understandings of the *cadaastre* and the maritime public domain became important nodes for perceiving 'propertied landscapes' (Fawaz and Moumtaz 2020) and thus a central part for understanding the notions of public and private for my interlocutors. While I have argued that spatial logics calibrate the relative location of coastal places in Beirut, I would add that they become part of a poetic understanding of space. In discussing poetics of space, I follow anthropologist Rupert Stasch, who defines spatial poetics by the capacity of spatial forms to 'hold special historical power because of the multiplicity of relational connections they mediate ... space's capacity to be poetically dense with a multiplicity of qualities and relational connections' (Stasch 2013, 556).<sup>9</sup> In ethnographic terms, I suggest that paying attention to poetics of space on the Lebanese coastline allows us to see how spatial arrangements and logics became rich with meaning and relationality for my interlocutors engaging with the coastline.



Law and bureaucracy were not merely statist forms of knowledge, but could be argued to form a tradition or history of spatialised understanding. Narratives and information about the legislation were widely circulated among civil society groups interested in questions of public space, and taken up and discussed even beyond activist circles. Especially among young politically aware adults, the notion that the coastline is public domain was keenly remembered, and the numerous exceptions made to the legislation later on were either dismissed as dubious or just not remarked on. My interlocutors from different backgrounds frequently reiterated to me the widely shared understanding that all attempts to fence off the coastline were illegal.

Since fencing off the coastline was a common practice among the leisure businesses and private beach clubs that proliferated along the Lebanese coastline, the tension was palpable and reflected in people's practices. Many beachgoers sought to relate to the colonial-era line in the sand where the waves hit highest in the winter by combining their leisurely practice with a political edge.<sup>10</sup> On multiple occasions, I heard people sharing the point that, even if a beach club has taken over a part of the beach, as a Lebanese citizen you have the right to utilise the sands they preside over: just walk along the coastline wherever you want, bring your towel, bypass any fence if necessary, and settle on the seaside to enjoy the Mediterranean. If the employees or security of the relevant beach club come up to you, inform them that this is your legal right and they will leave you alone. Some people who narrated this information would at the same time confess they had never engaged in such activity, yet others told me accounts of how they had entered sands in this manner. This sneaking onto private beaches was always framed as a righteous political act of reclaiming the public from those who had unrightfully enclosed and fenced it off. Even though the narratives of such reclaiming were likely more commonly circulating than actually carried out, they reinforced a common understanding of what should rightfully be public space.

This practice was contested. For example, during the summer after its opening, the newly built hotel on the public beach mentioned earlier in this chapter positioned a guard on the sands in order to prevent users of the public beach from entering and enjoying their time in front of the hotel. Similarly, most private beach restaurants and resorts would employ staff and security personnel to monitor and restrict non-paying beachgoers. With different modes of controlling access to the

coastline and tactics and knowledges by beachgoers to challenge and circumvent these restrictions, the spatial logic of the maritime public domain had become a lively and symbolically rich part of the configuration of the Lebanese littoral. A similar narrative of negotiating the public domain and politics of access was utilised by the research and performance collective Dictaphone in their influential 2012 performance 'This Sea Is Mine', where participants were shipped on fishing boats for a tour of the privatised Beirut coastline, and performance artist Tanya El Khoury (2016) would swim across the enclosures of private beach clubs to underline how what should be public domain had been privatised illegally.

As the spatial logics of the colonial-era land registry reform encountered the contemporary perception of coastal landscapes as propertied, the line in the sand became rich with a multiplicity of qualities for those engaging with the Lebanese littoral. As the youth sneaking onto beaches knew, the line carried political and poetical weight for understanding the contemporary Lebanese society and real neo-liberal policy on its coastline. Understanding the significance of the line drawn in cadastral maps in the 1920s allowed for my interlocutors to strike a pose, rhetorical or practical, for their preferred understanding of the coastline as common space.

## Conclusion

And then there was the public beach and the salience of the colonial line in the sand. As stated in the beginning of this chapter, the destruction by the municipality of Beirut of the equipment and infrastructure of the NGO managing the beach had ended in a kind of status quo, with the NGO moving their equipment below an invisible line dividing the beach into two parts. As I have explained, this line was likely drawn by a French surveyor in the 1920s. Even though the entirety of the beach was designated as a public beach by the Ministry of Transportation, in the land registry it was still demarcated into private and public parts. The municipal officials thus used their understanding of the configuration of public/private to chase the NGO from a privately held plot of land. Meanwhile the Ministry of Transportation, presiding over the maritime public domain, guaranteed the NGO could not be chased away from the seaward part of the beach.

This colonial line in the sand thus traced the different claims to the right to manage the beach, on the one hand by the municipality of Beirut and the owners of private property, and on the other hand by the NGO and the Ministry of Transportation. During summer 2019, the line separating the part of the beach designated as maritime public domain from the surveyed part got entangled with the way urban politics in Beirut is pursued through a propertied understanding of space. And it was never merely a matter of a simple application of the legislation on property in accordance with the cadastral record. For all sides taking part in the discussion, the propertied landscape became part of a wider understanding of space and for tactics and claims related to space and history in a situation of contestation.

But the story did not end there. In the summer of 2019 the municipality stationed some policemen at the beach entrance, effectively banning the NGO from engaging in any activity regardless of the line in the sand, such as renting chairs or tables, or selling things from their kiosk: this was explained to me by my interlocutors as trying to make them run dry of funds and thus drive them away from the beach for good. Consequently, as the autumn arrived, with the winter approaching and the waves reaching higher, my increasingly distressed interlocutors were wondering about the change of season. Soon their equipment was to fall under the rising waves, with uncertainty about where they could relocate their things.

In this chapter, I have given a perspective on how Mediterranean constellations, in this case embodied in colonial-era connections across the Mediterranean Sea, become reactivated and relevant in contemporary urban politics in Beirut. The way a propertied understanding of space in the context of urban politics forms the ground for contesting notions of public and private illustrates how the origins of the system for registering such property have become relevant again. For some actors, to make claims about public and private in 2010s Beirut necessitated reconnecting with the 1920s. For others, colonial lines in the sand became important only in their presence, and not through explicit knowledge of their history.

The way urban space in Beirut is understood as propertied and cadastral space is only one of the many ways the relative location of coastal places in Beirut is composed. While the juridical property-based understanding of the public/private distinction was an important feature of the discussions about urban space, it was by no means

the only axis on which the concepts of public and private were understood. Thus, while the public beach was separated into the maritime public domain, privately owned plots of land, and municipally owned plots of land, these distinctions were only one part of a wider overlap of different spatial logics. The beach as a whole was claimed as public, and even designated as such by some state bodies. It was definitely defended as public by Beirut civil society. What becomes evident is thus that the way places become significant, and become located, is a process of multiple overlapping spatial logics. The beach becomes not one but many, differing on the connections and separations active in giving it meaning.

The chapter has also shown not only how the ghosts of past spatial logics, such as the one informing French bureaucrats in the 1920s, haunt the present condition but how some have gone hunting for their traces to make political interventions on the coastline. I have discussed how the bureaucratic logic of separating space into clearly delineated plots publicly or privately owned on the one hand, and into surveyed land and non-surveyed public domain on the other, has become entangled in a logic of perception of coastal space as propertied. Finally, I have examined how such entanglements come to be poetically dense, as they carry a wider significance for a politics of the coastline. In the synchronic and diachronic intersection of spatial logics, the beach becomes multiply located, but the ways it is located are simultaneously setting the ground for contesting the way public and private are divided and acted upon. For some of my interlocutors, working against the neo-liberal privatisation of the Lebanese coastline included hunting for traces of the past, while for some it implied the gesture of sneaking onto private beaches that were properly perceived as public.

I would like to point out one further aspect of the narrative: the fact that these colonial traces across the Mediterranean tie into the discussion in Beirut about the relationship of the city with the Mediterranean Sea, as it currently stands. The relationship of Beirut to the sea ties intimately into the urban politics of the city today, as was noted to me by people ranging from scholar-activists to a municipal council member. For many, overdevelopment of the coastline in Beirut and the resulting lack of publicly accessible coastal spaces is working to sever the connection of the city and the sea. Therefore, the engagement with the history of land registry I have narrated in this chapter could also be understood as a navigation of Beirut to the sea by activists involved in

campaigns for public spaces, changing its location in the constellations composing the Mediterranean region. In this work, the bureaucratic ghosts of the colonial encounter still abound.

## Notes

- 1 Surveyed land is land that has been mapped and recorded in the land registry and given plot identities and clear boundaries, as opposed to the public domain (i.e. streets, maritime public domain), which has no plot identity in the registry. When using the term 'surveyed land' in this text, I refer to this precise meaning. *Cadastre* means land registry, the system for storing information on land ownership and demarcation. As Ruth Kark (1997) has stated, 'Cadastre is a French word originating in the latin *capitastrum*, meaning a register of poll tax. Later it came to mean "an official register of the ownership, extent, and value of real property in a given area, used as a basis for taxation" or "survey ... showing or including boundaries, property lines, etc." The cadastre was thus the means used by rulers to collect data on the division of landed property.'
- 2 For details about land registration in the Lebanese context, see for example Lewis (1979) on changes in land tenure during the Ottoman era, and Ziadeh (1993), who looks at the transition from Ottoman to French property rights legal regime, including in Lebanon.
- 3 See for example Jean-Francoise Blanchette's *Burdens of Proof* (2012, 148–54) for a discussion of the computerization of the Alsace-Moselle land registry.
- 4 This English translation and the information below are derived from a slideshow by Tony Assaf from the Ministry of Public Works and Transport from 2009. The law in question is the decision no. 144 from 10/06/1925 by the French High Commissioner.
- 5 See anthropologist Alice Stefanelli's article 'Beyond the Organic Intellectual' (2020) for a detailed discussion of the intertwining of expert knowledges and urban space campaigning in the context of a campaign opposing the construction of a motorway bridge across a historical Beirut neighbourhood.
- 6 Note, according to the Hans Wehr *Dictionary for Modern Standard Arabic*, *dalieh* means the trellis used for supporting vines.
- 7 As Walter Benjamin wrote, 'The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us' (Benjamin 2002, 477). In his study of mapping in the history of Beirut, Hatim el-Hibri wrote: 'Maps are material traces of the operation of power, which tell us about the *how* of power' (El-Hibri 2009, 120).
- 8 See also Alice Stefanelli's (2017, 188–89) dissertation for a detailed treatment of the legal history of Dalieh and another narration of the hunt for the original cadastral maps.
- 9 See also Herzfeld's use of social poetics as analysis of essentialism in everyday life (Herzfeld 2005) and Gaston Bachelard's classic *Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 2014).

- 10 This could be understood as a mode of Asef Bayat's (2013, 46) *encroachment of the ordinary*, 'the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied'.

## References

- Bachelard, Gaston. 2014 [1964]. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Baumann, Hannes. 2017. *Citizen Hariri*. London: Hurst Publishers.
- Bayat, Asef. 2013. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. 2nd ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2002. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Bou Akar, Hiba. 2019. *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Blanchette, Jean-François. 2012. *Burdens of Proof: Cryptographic Culture and Evidence Law in the Age of Electronic Documents*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Byrnes, Giselle. 2002. *Boundary Markers: Land Surveying and the Colonisation of New Zealand*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books.
- Dalieh Campaign. 2015. *Dalieh Campaign Booklet*. Accessed 25 January 2021. <https://dalieh.org/assets/booklet-en.pdf>
- Dictaphone. 2013. *This Sea Is Mine*. Accessed 25 January 2021. <http://www.dictaphonegroup.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/SIM-booklet-compressed.pdf>
- El-Hibri, Hatem. 2009. 'Mapping Beirut: Toward a History of the Translation of Space from the French Mandate through the Civil War (1920–91)'. *The Arab World Geographer* 12 (3–4): 119–35. <https://doi.org/10.5555/arwg.12.3-4.t923868061464973>
- El Khoury, Tania. 2016. 'Swimming in Sewage: Political Performances in the Mediterranean'. *Performance Research* 21 (2): 138–40.
- Fawaz, Mona, and Nada Moumtaz. 2020. 'Neighborhoods as Propertied Landscapes: Lessons from Beirut's Reconstructions'. *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*. Accessed 25 January 2021. <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/21850>
- Green, Sarah. 2005. *Notes from the Balkans: Locating Marginality and Ambiguity on the Greek-Albanian Border*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Green, Sarah. 2019. 'Entangled Borders'. *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo* 21 (2). <https://doi.org/10.4000/aam.1749>
- Haila, Anne. 2017. 'Institutionalization of "The Property Mind"'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41 (3): 500–07. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12495>
- Herzfeld, Michael. 2005. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Home, Robert. 2006. 'Scientific Survey and Land Settlement in British Colonialism, with Particular Reference to Land Tenure Reform in the Middle East 1920–50'. *Planning Perspectives* 21 (1): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665430500397048>

- Kark, Ruth. 1997. 'Mamlūk and Ottoman Cadastral Surveys and Early Mapping of Landed Properties in Palestine'. *Agricultural History* 71 (1): 46–70.
- Kaufman, Asher. 2015. 'Colonial Cartography and the Making of Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria'. In *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, edited by Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Legal Agenda. 2016. 'The Legal Course of the Loss of Lebanon's Shoreline'. *The Legal Agenda*, October 6, 2016. <https://www.legal-agenda.com/en/article.php?id=1766>.
- Lewis, Bernard. 1979. 'Ottoman Land Tenure and Taxation in Syria'. *Studia Islamica* 50: 109–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595560>
- Navaro-Yashin, Yael. 2009. 'Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (1): 1–18.
- Neocleous, Mark. 2003. 'Off the Map: On Violence and Cartography'. *European Journal of Social Theory* 6 (4): 409–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310030064003>
- Stasch, Rupert. 2013. 'The Poetics of Village Space When Villages Are New: Settlement Form as History Making in Papua, Indonesia'. *American Ethnologist* 40 (3): 555–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12039>
- Stefanelli, Alice. 2017. 'Who Is the City for – Civic Advocacy, Private Interest and Statecraft in Contemporary Beirut'. PhD thesis. Manchester: University of Manchester.
- Stefanelli, Alice. 2020. 'Beyond the Organic Intellectual: Politics and Contestation in the Planning Practice'. *City & Society* 32 (3): 649–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12340>
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1996. 'Cutting the Network'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2 (3): 517–35. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034901>
- Williams, Elizabeth. 2015. 'Mapping the Cadastre, Producing the Fellaḥ: Technologies and Discourses of Rule in French Mandate Syria and Lebanon'. In *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, edited by Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ziadeh, Farhat. 1993. 'Property Rights in the Middle East: From Traditional Law to Modern Codes'. *Arab Law Quarterly* 8 (1): 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3381489>