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**The Genesis of a Mosque:
Negotiating Sacred Space in Downtown Beirut**

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EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE
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WARD VLOEBERGHES

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Abstract

In this paper, we will provide an overview of different stages in the coming about of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque, the so-called “Hariri mosque”, a construction completed in 2005. By focusing on five determining phases of the project, five situations of bargaining over space, we wish to allow the reader to take a look into the complex history of the mosque by documenting how a selection of actors became, willing or not, associated with what is now Lebanon’s largest congregational mosque. We will pay special attention to identify the major actors involved and see how the project has in itself, physically and spatially, evolved over the decades. It is our objective too to illustrate that and how legality has been treated throughout these different periods as a flexible given that could be accommodated according to the necessity of the situation or in function of the preferences of the respective actors. In doing so, this religious building’s emergence recalls the history of Beirut and its significant, diversified Sunni community. What follows is a description and an analysis of how a 30 million dollar project bestowed on the Lebanese capital a major landmark, after a dynamic and surprising trajectory that compasses almost a century and a half. This contribution attempts to highlight how, by constant actions and reactions, and with an impressive variety of national and international actors, an exceptional and highly symbolical place of worship emerged into the skyline of a cosmopolitan metropolis in an ongoing, transformative process of acquiring, claiming and appropriating (sacred) land.

Keywords

religious architecture, urban politics, anthropology of space, Islam, Lebanon

Preliminaries*

Beautiful or not, the Muhammad al-Amin mosque (Fig.1) certainly is Lebanon's largest and perhaps even the Near East's largest mosque. Its characteristically blue dome is dominantly present all over the Beirut city centre. The construction of this mosque arguably constitutes the *magnum opus* of the late Rafiq al-Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister assassinated in 2005. This new structure, in a pervasive way, transforms the immediate urban environment and embodies a meaningful evolution of the city's skyline.

At first sight, the construction of this monumental mosque, also known as the "Hariri mosque", may have little to do with informal settlements. Urban informality in Beirut, any occasional visitor to the Lebanese capital will probably argue, can be found across virtually all areas and neighbourhoods of this eastern Mediterranean port city but certainly not within its nucleus, the Beirut Central District. Nevertheless, if we dig into the details of this project's origins we find that several formal and informal (legal) practices of acquiring, claiming and appropriating land accompanied the construction process and thus contributed to shape the edifice into what it has become today: an intended benchmark of Islamic architecture in a symbolically most valuable part of Beirut.

By analysing five different phases throughout this nascent mosque's history, conception, construction and use, we wish to show how this sample of apparently extremely "formal" settlement has been subject to subtle negotiations of what, at one point, appeared to be no more than undeveloped and residual (although central) urban space. These five phases can be seen as five situations of bargaining over sacred space. Throughout this overview, we will highlight the flexible and pragmatic attitude adopted by almost all actors involved towards legality as a set of fixed laws. This attitude can be said to have constituted an environment of legal ambiguity that has been present during the whole 'life' of the mosque as a project.

Before we go into any further detail about the object of our study, we believe it is important as well as useful to clarify some of the terminology used so far, more specifically in the title.

First, by the formula 'genesis of a mosque' we do not intend to take a normative position, nor to make a judgement whatsoever; we simply mean to indicate that we will be talking about the creation of a mosque. This entails the creation in a wide sense, from the conception of the mosque, via its factual construction, to its actual use. In using the term 'negotiation' of space we wish to stress the fact that acquiring, defining and appropriating space is an ongoing, dynamic process that involves more than a mere moment of bargaining over a price or a parcel. Our use of the term 'sacred' is used in a broad sense and does not mean that the space under analysis is exclusively related to the realm of spiritualism or religion. On the contrary, as we will try to show, although the mosque is (or may seem to be) a religious edifice, a lot of political, judicial and sociological dynamics are associated with it. Finally, downtown Beirut refers to a specific part of the Lebanese capital in which the mosque has arisen.

To be clear, the five phases of informal conflict and formal confrontation selected here are of unequal length (1850-1975; 1975-1990; 1990-2002; 2003-2005; 2005-2008) and are not governed by any specific rationale other than practical and didactical: we hope that they will allow the reader to take a look into the complex history of the mosque. We hope that they will allow, as well, to focus on practices of acquiring and claiming land and of titling a settlement. We propose to start by taking a closer look at how the project matured through the decades.

*

A previous version of this paper was presented in Workshop 4 'Public Policies and Legal Practices toward Informal Settlements in the Middle East and Egypt' at the Ninth Mediterranean Research Meeting, Florence & Montecatini Terme, 12-15 March 2008, organised by the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. I wish to thank all participants to the workshop for their stimulating comments. Special thanks are due to my discussant, Etienne Léna, and to the convenors of the workshop.

I. From *zâwiya* to *jâmi'* ; from Abu Nasr to Muhammad al-Amin (1850-1975)

The mosque's history dates back, at least to 1933, since a document¹ recalls the presence of a *zâwiya*, named *zâwiya Abû Nasr* on a plot of land registered with the real-estate administration of Beirut in the sector of "*al-Marfa*" (the port). In the Muslim world, a *zâwiya* (pl. *zawâyâ*) is often closely related to Sufism. The venue itself can be extremely diverse in form and one can conceive of a *zawiya* as anything ranging from the corner of a building to the mausoleum of a saint².

Little more is known about this place of worship related to "Abu Nasr", most probably the name of a local sheikh, except that it has been operating since the mid nineteenth century. Moreover, somewhat confusingly, several sources mention commercial activity of different nature on the same site. This is the case in the precious work of Chehab Eddine, who speaks explicitly of a "souq Abu Nasr", also known as the souq al-Moutran, where one could buy "colours, spices and oriental sweets"³. The presence of a market place of the same name is corroborated by the testimony of at least one interviewee who told us that he remembers himself as a boy buying coffee beans there "for 25 piasters"⁴. Still other informants have referred to a so-called *qahwat al-'izâz* (glass café⁵) on the site or in the direct vicinity of where the mosque now stands.

Whether there was a *zawiya*, a café or a souq or all of these at different times or next to each other, it was with the objective of establishing a place of worship at this location that several Sunni families of Beirut joined efforts in the early twentieth century –hence the reference to a nascent mosque in 1933. These families and notables started to raise funds to ensure the building of a mosque on this site and from then on, the project of the mosque has lived throughout several generations of Beirut's community of Sunni Muslims⁶ as a communal dream. Several residents remember their ancestors making donations for the planned mosque. As such, the mosque lived among the inhabitants in an imaginary way, in terms of spoken references and collection boxes where one could deposit his or her contribution to the project.

In order to grasp the significance and the impact of this project, it may be helpful to sketch a brief overview of the historical context in which the *zawiya* Abu Nasr and the subsequent plans for the mosque emerged. This seems all the more relevant since it has been suggested to us throughout discussions with informants that the attempt to establish a Sunni place of worship in this part of the Beirut may have been a reaction against what many non-Christian Beirutis (and they were predominantly Sunni at the time) felt was an invasion of this emerging city by the newly arrived missionaries during the second half of the nineteenth century⁷. Such an interpretation may be a bit one-sided and exaggerated but it is an undeniable fact that the arrival of western missionaries and their activities had a considerable impact on daily lives of Beirut residents and influenced, among other

¹ Document prepared by Dar al-Fatwa, which is the main Sunni authority in Lebanon. Dâr al-Fatwâ, *masjid muhammad al-'amin sallâ allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, Beirut, 6 pages. The document is undated. However, repeated inquiry and assistance of the Mufti's administration allowed retrieving the date of publication as 28 August 2004.

² For a more complete coverage of the term, turn to: Ousmane KANE, "zâwiyah" in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, New York: Oxford UP, 1995, pp. 370-373.

³ Saïd CHEHAB EDDINE, *Géographie humaine de Beyrouth. Avec une étude sommaire sur les deux villes de Damas et de Bagdad*, Beyrouth : Imprimerie Calfat, 1960, p. 257.

⁴ Interview with Youssef Haidar, Beirut, 28 June 2006.

⁵ A commercial outlet, where one could order drinks and food and/or smoke a water pipe.

⁶ For a classical study on the Sunni community of Beirut and some of its internal dynamics, see: Michael JOHNSON, *Class and Client in Beirut: The Sunni Muslim Community and the Lebanese State 1840-1985*, Ithaca Press, 1986.

⁷ One of the most tangible testimonies of the missionaries' activities is the opening of universities such as the American University of Beirut in 1866 and the Université Saint-Joseph in 1875.

things, the existing relations of power among elites of Beirut in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁸

Around the mid nineteenth century, Beirut had began to witness a significant expansion both in terms of territory and population, as the city⁹ grew from 20 000 inhabitants on a surface of 134 hectares in 1860 to 120 000 souls on 350 hectares in 1912 and further 220 000 people on 1056 hectares by 1935¹⁰. Throughout the 19th century, the unpopular Ottoman rulers who controlled the tiny coastal city of Beirut, subordinated to Damascus, relied on a *divide-et-impera* strategy in which their Sunni kinship but also the Greek orthodox establishment fared well. The presence of both sects is attested by the religious buildings they used, long before there was even talk of a *zawiya*¹¹. However, the fact that the Saint-Georges Maronite Cathedral, existed at the time, stands witness to the fact that the Maronite community (which had arrived in substantial numbers after the events of 1860¹²) was already present as well.

These parentheses are important to bear in mind because they show the processes on the longer run and they allow us to inscribe the meaning of the construction of the mosque within a long-term perspective¹³. However, this is certainly not the only dynamic at play, as the recorded history of the project suggests that the project was caught up in an internal contest between different fractions of the Sunni community of Beirut. The identified document prepared by Dar al-Fatwa is crystal-clear about the mosque's origin, as it states explicitly that

the Muhammad al-Amin mosque was founded since the year 1933 under the name *zawiya* "Abu Nasr" on part 6 of parcel number 323 of the real-estate sector al-Marfa'.

Things are, however, much less transparent when it comes to determine who exactly took which initiative in order to transform the existing *zawiya*, a *waqf* (religious endowment) administrated by descendants of the Abu Nasr family¹⁴, and to develop into a full-fledged mosque. Several actors interacted and it is not easy to identify them nor to retrieve their respective relations.

When it comes to collect more helpful information, one interesting document at hand is a judicial document. On 26 Jumada II 1327 AH / 5 May 1948 AD, the Sunni supreme appeal court of Beirut adjudicated the transfer of the tutelage of the mosque and the fore-mentioned *waqf* to the Directorate General of the Islamic Awqaf (DGIA). The very existence of such a ruling suggests that a dispute had ensued between the administrators of the *waqf* and the DGIA.

⁸ See : Samir KASSIR, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, Paris: Fayard, 2004.

⁹ May Davie in a study of Beirut in the early 19th century speaks of Beirut as no more than an ottoman borough of less than 10000 souls. See: May DAVIE, "Au prisme de l'altérité, les orthodoxies de Beyrouth au début du XIXe siècle" in *Revue des mondes musulman et de la méditerranée*, N° 107-110, p.161-182.

¹⁰ See: CHEHAB EDDINE, *Géographie humaine de Beyrouth...*, fig.47, p.195. The expansion continued until the mid 1970s with 1,1 million and 1997 with 1,3 million, or one third (33%) of the Lebanese population was estimated to live in Beirut. By then, the physical boundaries of Beirut had become blurred because of the rapid and uncontrolled expansions that it had become hard to define the total surface of the city. For more details, see: Ghaleb FAOUR, Theodora HADDAD, Sébastien VELUT, Eric VERDEIL, "Beyrouth: Quarante ans de croissance urbaine" in *M@ppemonde* 79 (2005.3), available online.

¹¹ The mosque Emir Mansour 'Assaf had been built in 16th century by a family of Sunni notable with origins in Kisrwan, whereas the Greek Orthodox cathedral of Saint George was inaugurated in 1767. See: KASSIR, *Histoire de Beyrouth* , p. 92-93.

¹² On this topic, see: Leila T. FAWAZ, *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860*, London: IB Tauris, 1994.

¹³ In this respect we can also recall that the Omari mosque in the centre is a converted basilica that was known as the Church of Saint John at the time of the Crusaders. See: KASSIR, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, p. 76-77.

¹⁴ The document mentions Sheikh Mohammad Abu Nasr, Sheikh Abdel Karim Abu Nasr and Sayyid Subhi Abu Nasr.

At this point, it is important to note that the document produced by the Dar al-Fatwa claims that in the years following the ruling of the tribunal, the Directorate General of Islamic Awqaf formed a committee “to care and supervise matters related to the mosque”¹⁵. Still according to the same document, this committee decided to found a « Muhammad al-Amin Association », which then obtained a permit from the Ministry of Interior and worked for the acquisition of terrains adjacent to part 6 and on which the Islamic Awqaf intended to build “a large and appropriate mosque”. The text goes on by a reproachful remark:

the Association, however, proceeded to register the parts that it acquired with the contributions of the Muslims at the name of the Association instead of registering them on the name of the Directorate General of Islamic Awqaf.

Clearly, the text condemns the behaviour of the Association and considers that its actions were the start of a problem that accounts for much of the delay in the construction during the following decades. Nevertheless, the presentation made in the Dar al-Fatwa document is but one version of reality. Another explanation for the inertia that hit the project seems to reside in a battle of influence between various fractions of Beirut’s Sunni community.

As several of our interlocutors have confirmed, it appears that the committee Muhammad al-Amin was founded in the early 1940s, and later (most likely around 1965) evolved into an “association”. This body consisted of members of several influential families within the Sunni establishment of Beirut¹⁶ and was indeed set up with the objective to find funding for the acquisition of neighbouring terrains. However, crucially, it considered itself autonomous and, as such, acted independently from the DGIA –which it viewed as a rival institution.

As a consequence, the verdict by the Sunni supreme appeal court did not settle the dispute that had ensued between the Association and the DGIA. On the contrary, the association contested the legality of the 1948 ruling in favour of the DGIA. Thus, it went on with its own activities and had its newly acquired properties registered to its own name, something that, as we have seen, was considered illegal by the DGIA on the grounds that it alone was the legitimate authority to administer what it called “Muslim contributions”.

The relation between both bodies remained strained, with both sides rallying for political backing – thus worsening the situation rather than paving the way for a settlement of the dispute. Notwithstanding the implication and contributions of a vast network of local, national and even international donors (including Gamal Abdel Nasser) the project didn’t materialise.

When we take a look at the *’ifâda ’iqârîya* (real-estate notification) reveals indeed that parcel 323 of sector *al-Marfa*’ (the Port) has been left inactive for almost four decades as virtually no changes were registered between 1966 and 2002¹⁷. This is not to say, however, that no plans have been elaborated; on the contrary, detailed architectural schemes had been drawn decades ago¹⁸ and by the mid-seventies, a billboard placed on the site made explicit the ambition to build a mosque there.

However, if during the 1960s the association appears to be dominated by local political chiefs and clientelist patrons in Beirut, during the last two decades of the twentieth century the Association

¹⁵ Dâr al-Fatwâ, *masjid muhammad al-’amin sallâ allahu ’alayhi wa sallam*, Beirut, s.d., page 2. The document makes a distinction between a committee set up by the DGIA and the “Association Muhammad al-Amin” that was created out of it.

¹⁶ Such as Abdallah Mashnouq, qualified by Johnson as an executive of the Maqassed organisation as well as a Nasserist politician and a close ally of Saib Salam, a four-time Lebanese prime minister. See : JOHNSON, *Class and Client...*, p. 134.

¹⁷ The notifications are kept by the Ministry of Finance. The copy obtained by the author dates from 29 March 2006.

¹⁸ As shown in: DAR AL-FATWA, *Mashrû’ masjid Muhammad al-’amîn*, Beirut, 2001.

Muhammad al-Amin –thereby reflecting a wider trend among Muslim institutions¹⁹- seems to have been prey to a tendency of islamisation.

Thus, as the second millennium drew to a close, few Beirutis could have guessed that a breakthrough in this ambitious project was near. This critical point was in fact an accumulation of different factors.

II. The Controversy over Beirut Central District (1975-1990)

1. *The Birth of a Company...*

A first, important and quite spectacular factor that influenced the construction of the mosque was the development of the area surrounding it. That area is the Beirut city centre, known in jargon as Beirut Central District (BCD). Although the city centre comes across today as a homogenous neighbourhood dominated by the sandstone colour of its buildings, and may, as a consequence, provide the occasional visitor with a feeling of natural uniformity, the BCD is rather the artificial result of a huge enterprise that entailed uncountable rounds of formal and informal negotiations at various levels.

In fact, SOLIDERE²⁰, as the company is called, is the latest and materialised outcome of a series of several different reconstruction plans that have been elaborated after dramatic violence hit Lebanon in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As Beyhum has shown²¹, three major plans for the reconstruction of Beirut have been prepared after the subsequent rounds of fighting in Beirut during the decade and a half that followed 1975. Each of these plans was, each in its own way, the expression of how the urban engineers intended to react to the socio-political alterations and the physical transformations brought about by the different waves of violence. Although the old city centre and the infamous demarcation line running north-south were the most severely damaged areas, it is important to pay attention, as Beyhum points out, to a parallel process.

On the periphery of Beirut, new development, equal if not greater in size than that of the area destroyed, took place. This led to a shift in the city's centre of gravity to the outskirts. The sociological pattern integrating Beirut's public spaces at the centre was seriously undermined by the rise of single-community ghettos in the suburbs. The city was divided into several unconnected islands, and neutral spaces were either annexed to these islands or destroyed.²²

Because of the huge financial, symbolical and political interests at stake, however, the reconstruction of the BCD has been a densely studied subject in post-war Lebanon²³. Other

¹⁹ On this phenomenon, see Bernard ROUGIER, *Everyday Jihad. The Rise of Militant Among Palestinians in Lebanon*, Harvard UP, 2007 (the English translation of the French original of 2004, published by Presses Universitaires de France).

²⁰ A French acronym for Société libanaise de développement et de reconstruction de Beyrouth. See: <http://www.solidere.com>. For a presentation of Solidere's core project by a senior advisor to Solidere, see: Angus GAVIN & Ramez MALUF, *Beirut Reborn: The Restoration and Development of the Central District*, London: Academy Editions, 1996.

²¹ Nabil BEYHUM, « The Crisis of Urban Culture : The Three Reconstruction Plans for Beirut » in *The Beirut Review*, N° 4, Fall 1992. A first plan was elaborated and presented in 1977-1978 and dealt exclusively with the renovation of the city centre, destroyed during the violence of 1975-1976. The second, more inclusive and ambitious plan of 1983 covered the entire Metropolitan Beirut; and, finally, the 1991 plan was unveiled, which once again covered only the Beirut city centre.

²² BEYHUM, *The Crisis...*

²³ See e.g. the work of Heiko SCHMID, "Der Wiederaufbau des Beirut Stadtzentrums. Ein Beitrag zur handlungsorientierten politisch-geographischen Konfliktforschung" in *Heidelberger Geographische Arbeiten*, Bd. 114, Heidelberg, 2002 ; Oliver KÖGLER, *Der Umgang mit dem urbanen Kulturerbe im Nachkriegslibanon*, Inaugural Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde, Heidelberg, 2005 and Eric VERDEIL, *Une ville et ses urbanistes. Beyrouth en reconstruction*, thèse de doctorat en géographie, mention urbanisme, Université de Paris I Sorbonne, dir. P. Merlin, 2002.

phenomena that resulted from the seemingly endless cycle of violence, such as the emergence of new urban centres and structures, are not only less well known but much less studied²⁴.

Given the importance of the location of our mosque, in this paper we will focus on the city centre and leave out other areas.

It is not by accident that the mosque arose on its actual location. As we have seen, there are historic reasons for this choice. Moreover, this corner of the Martyrs Square in downtown Beirut is also a prime location in itself because of the special place it occupies in Lebanese historiography. Over time, this central square and its immediate surroundings have not only served as a public space attracting and connecting Lebanese from all over the country but the area has also been the scene for some of the most important and most intense events of socio-economic and political life of the country, before as well as after the war²⁵. As a consequence, as Najem maintains, the Beirut Central District is the most prized piece of property in Lebanon. During Lebanon's prosperous years (1950-1975) the city centre was not only the heart of the country's economic, cultural and bureaucratic establishment, but it was also the financial and commercial centre of the Middle East. It might even be argued that the centre's prosperity confirmed Lebanon's success as a country.²⁶

During Lebanon's civil war, however, the city centre was heavily damaged and the square, as the focus of conflict, became a desolate physical barrier between Christian-dominated East Beirut and Muslim-dominated West Beirut. During these years, other economic and cultural centres, most of which were parochial, such as the Maronite-dominated city of Joughieh or the mainly Shiite southern suburbs, replaced the BCD.

It should not astonish, therefore, that as soon as the violence seemed to calm down, major efforts were deployed to bring this central part of the capital to life once again. Taking into account its eminent location it should not astonish that the reconstruction attracted much attention and was, at times, heavily debated by many different actors. Najem puts it well, when he points out the political dimension of the reconstruction effort as follows:

With the end of the war, the reconstruction of Beirut's city centre became a project of paramount importance. From a symbolic standpoint, rebuilding a centre accessible to persons of all faiths would help to signify an end to the divisions in Lebanese society. From a practical standpoint, Beirut's centre is the natural location for Lebanon's financial and economic core. There has been a continuing belief among many observers of the Lebanese scene that those who dominate the city centre will also dominate the rest of the country.²⁷

Najem goes even further and proposes to use the reconstruction process as a prism to analyse political life in Lebanon during the first decade after the end of the violence, because

in many ways, (...) looking at the reconstruction of the city centre provides an interesting avenue to understanding the forces, both governmental and private, that were involved in driving through the reconstruction of Lebanon.²⁸

Among the people who promoted such reconstruction plans, one was increasingly present on the Lebanese political scene –although he mostly remained out of the spotlights²⁹. That man, Rafiq Hariri,

²⁴ Although recent work by Mona HARB, "Pious Entertainment: Al-Saha Traditional Village" in *ISIM Review*, N° 17 (Spring 2006), p. 10-11 and Mona FAWAZ, "Beirut: The City as a Body Politic" in *ISIM Review*, N° 20 (Autumn 2007), p. 22-23 has started to fill up this academic void.

²⁵ See: KASSIR, *Histoire de Beyrouth...* and Samir KHALAF, *Heart of Beirut. Reclaiming the Bourj*, London: Saqi, 2006.

²⁶ NAJEM, *Lebanon's Renaissance...*, p. 163. This can indeed be matter of debate, especially when considering Hezbollah's consolidation of Beirut's southern suburbs. See: Mona HARB, « *al-Dahiye de Beyrouth: parcours d'une stigmatisation urbaine, consolidation d'un territoire politique* » in *Genèses*, 51, Juin 2003, p.70-91.

²⁷ NAJEM, *Lebanon's Renaissance...*, p. 164.

²⁸ Idem

while mediating among warring factions with a mandate of the Saudi King Fahd, had nourished his own vision and dreamt to make the city of Beirut rise once again from its ashes. Years before the warfare had stopped, he had offered his logistical help to clear the rubble. At the time, protests had emerged that contested this contribution, arguing the bulldozers were destroying valuable architecture rather than helping to clear the debris. The project of rebuilding Beirut, however, had been in Hariri's mind since the early 1980's. Blanford makes this plain as follows:

Rebuilding Beirut would be the fulfilment of a vision he had nurtured for over a decade as manifested by the scale model he liked to keep nearby. "He was dreaming of Solidere since 1982. This was his real dream," says Nohad Mashnouq a close former advisor to Hariri who helped market the scheme to sceptical politicians in 1991.³⁰

As a Lebanese self-made man, Hariri was the founder of a flourishing conglomerate with construction activities as its core business. He was determined to propose his services as well as his vast network of powerful friends to rebuild the Lebanese capital. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that Hariri was considered to be the main player behind the 1991 plan, designed by consultants Dar al-Handasah and Bechtel, to rebuild Beirut city centre and upgrade its infrastructure. The Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), a public body, initially commissioned the plan, but it was financed by one of Hariri's companies, which also had considerable input into the plan. So much so, that Najem recalls that some argued that the huge stakes later pushed Hariri into public office:

the degree of Hariri's personal interest in the BCD's reconstruction was such that critics have suggested that it was one of the main factors behind his decision to make himself available as a candidate for the office of prime minister. It was argued that when the \$3 billion plan for the BCD's reconstruction had come under fire from both private and public figures only then did Hariri put himself forward³¹.

To turn the scale model of 'his' Beirut into reality, Hariri faced huge obstacles. But he was determined to overcome these burdens and find or –if necessary- create the tools he needed to succeed. For example, in 1992, after Hariri had become Prime Minister, the CDR saw its legal powers considerably enhanced and it was placed under the authority of the Council of Ministers while a business partner to Hariri was named at the head of the CDR. As such, the CDR became a powerful agency in an emerging shadow administration gradually set up by Hariri in order to circumvent red tape and through which the premier could have a substantial impact on reconstruction policy, especially since the CDR was administering a colossal budget of more than ten billion dollars³².

One of the main obstacles concerning reconstruction initiatives was the management of property rights of the ruined, in some cases, partly abandoned quarters of central Beirut. To deal with this problem, a real-estate company was set up to let the city recover in all its diversity and old glory and to firmly re-establish Beirut as an attractive international centre for the finance, business, culture and tourist industries³³. This company

would simply take over the 130 hectares in the city center, thus establishing the biggest instrument of urban management in Lebanon and perhaps in the Middle East³⁴

(Contd.) _____

²⁹ On the early period of Hariri as a political actor, see : BONNE, Emmanuel, *Vie publique, patronage et clientèle. Rafik Hariri à Saïda*, Beyrouth : CERMOC, 1995.

³⁰ Nicholas BLANFORD, *Killing Mr Lebanon. The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and its impact on the Middle East*, London : IB Tauris, 2006, p. 41.

³¹ NAJEM, *Lebanon's Renaissance...*, p. 164.

³² 18 billion US \$ according to Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon...*, p. 43.

³³ For a presentation of Solidere's core project by a senior advisor to Solidere, see: Angus GAVIN & Ramez MALUF, *Beirut Reborn: The Restoration and Development of the Central District*, London: Academy Editions, 1996.

³⁴ BEYHUM, *The Crisis...*

The mere task of identifying owners and documenting property certificates was a daunting task. Some have claimed that the area considered by Solidere had as many as 40.000 different owners before the company took over all property rights itself³⁵. Therefore, Solidere proposed a solution *sui generis*, as Blanford explains:

To counter the potentially intractable problems of having one company renovate properties owned by hundreds of different people and institutions, Solidere came up with an innovative plan to involve owners in the project by offering them shares in the company matching the value of their respective properties.³⁶

Indeed, in order to compensate owners and tenants of property in the area, those of them who had managed to gain institutional approval of their ownership documents were handed so called A-shares³⁷ in exchange for the estimated value of their property. Predictably, fierce discussion erupted about what many believed to be the heavily underestimated value of their property and therefore accusing Solidere and Hariri of making profit on another one's back.

The B-shares, on the other hand, were available for public and corporate subscription during a period of several months ending on the 10th of January 1994. Hariri himself, abiding by the imposed maximum limit of 10 % per shareholder, acquired B-shares for 125 million \$ at a price of 100 \$ each, amounting to 7% of the total of 6,5 million shares³⁸. Nabil Boustani, an influential Member of Parliament and one of the two vice-chairmen³⁹ of Solidere, subscribed for 50 million \$ worth of B-shares. As the subscription period ended, Solidere had raised a capital of 1,6 billion \$, the equivalent of almost one third of the country's GDP, then estimated at 5,5 billion \$⁴⁰. In other words, the results of the company highly affected the Lebanese economy as a whole.

Even though he officially owned less than a tenth of the shares, it was evident that Hariri, who would continue to make of Solidere his hobbyhorse during the following years, now held a particularly strong position among the investors, all of whom were either Lebanese residents or citizens of other Arab countries. His position was so strong because "many of the initial subscribers were believed to have sold their shares to Hariri and his close associates, thus further increasing Hariri's control of the company."⁴¹

2. ...a Contested Transaction

The project proposed by Solidere was not to the liking of several Lebanese who did not wait to formulate their objections. In fact, from the very beginning –in spite of its original character– Solidere's proposal to compensate property owners in the form of shares of a new private company

³⁵ Tom Pierre NAJEM, *Lebanon's Renaissance. The Political Economy of Reconstruction*, Reading : Ithaca Press, 2000, p. 164.

³⁶ Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon...*, p. 44.

³⁷ Extensive details of the complex history of the birth of Solidere and the respective actors and stakes involved are well described by Najem and can be found in his solid study. See: Najem, *Lebanon's Renaissance...*, p. 163-173. It is nevertheless important to note that the attribution and distribution of A-shares was quite a problematic matter as, in numerous cases, several owners pretended to own the same property.

³⁸ Marwan ISKANDAR, *Rafik Hariri and the fate of Lebanon*, London – Beirut: Saqi, 2006, p. 59 maintains that Hariri's participation in Solidere amounted to 183 million \$, which he paid "for the capped 10 % shareholding by any individual, institution or group".

³⁹ For more information about the members of Solidere's board, see: Najem, *Lebanon's Renaissance...*, p. 166 or <http://www.solidere.com/solidere/leaders.html>. Not unimportantly, the president of the board, Nasser Chamma, is a business associate of Hariri. He was, like Hariri born in Saida, graduated in California and joined the Hariri group after working for Bechtel, a major engineering company based in the USA. See: Iskandar, *Rafiq Hariri...*, p. 68.

⁴⁰ Georges CORM, *Le Liban contemporain. Histoire et société*, Paris: La Découverte, 2005, p. 253.

⁴¹ Assem Salam, quoted by Najem, *Lebanon's Renaissance...*, p. 167.

encountered much criticism. Two kinds of contestation exist. The first is based on factual grounds (condemning urban annihilation and contesting ownership rights) while the second is a more ideological type of criticism.

To start with, a considerable and valuable part of the old city has been lost in what accounts according to some as an operation of major destruction:

the demolition of three hundred buildings in the old city center, without determining whether they could be salvaged, generated a contrary feeling. What the fighting had not managed to destroy of the urban memory and the national heritage, the bulldozers of those reconstructing the city destroyed far more radically.⁴²

Furthermore, the opponents⁴³ maintained that the appropriation of realty by Solidere as well as the expropriation was “highly illegal” and a violation of the democratic rights of the owners and tenants of property because they had not been consulted or even given the right to opt out.

The rightful claimants presented three reasons why they opposed the plan: the project forced them to associate with third parties; it was unconstitutional because it deprived them of their private property, transferring it to a private real estate company; and there was no proof that they were unable to pay or borrow money for the reconstruction of the old city.⁴⁴

The proponents of the plan defended the decision by saying it was the only feasible solution –a view, once again, contested by the critics of Solidere on the grounds that identical constraints had not prevented development elsewhere in Beirut.

These legal arguments laid bare a more philosophic sort of criticism about the way to conceive of reconstruction:

If the objective is to transcend the war, then it must reverse the profound sociological changes caused by the war at the level of services, public transportation, road networks, and cultural and economic activities. (...) Reconstruction does not simply imply rebuilding but also includes social processes; (...) it is a process taking into account time, and is not merely a transformation of space. Reconstruction must act to regenerate urban society.⁴⁵

Moreover, notwithstanding the conveniently altruistic meaning of its French homophone (*solidaire*), much of Solidere’s actions suggest that its *raison d’être* is essentially to do big business and maximise profit for its shareholders. The privately owned real estate company indeed turned profitable soon and, today, its shares trade on the Stock Exchanges of Beirut, London and Kuwait⁴⁶.

Since he was involved on both the public and the private levels, suspicions of a conflict of interest seemed not completely unjustified. Obviously, Hariri was wearing two jackets, one of decision maker on the political level and another one as an investor in private company. Crucially, this company was involved in many of the projects he had to decide on in his capacity of politician. Therefore, several observers monitoring the events closely expressed concern about this ambiguous situation.

This is precisely the problem: conceived of as an island of wealth and power, the city center would no longer have a centralizing role, but would instead become an island like all the other urban islands which arose during the war. Yet it is difficult not to see the tenuousness of this aspect of the project, which concentrates authority and wealth in the city center. The buildings offered for

⁴² BEYHUM, *The Crisis...*

⁴³ Paul Mourani and Assem Salam, quoted by Najem, *Lebanon’s Renaissance...*, p. 165.

⁴⁴ BEYHUM, *The Crisis...*

⁴⁵ BEYHUM, *The Crisis...*

⁴⁶ The introduction on the Kuwait Stock Exchange dates from March 2005. See: SOLIDERE, *Annual Report 2004*, Beirut: Solidere, 2005, p. 8. Also check: Osama HABIB, “Property demand boosts Solidere’s net profit to \$ 108.5 million for 2005” in *Daily Star*, Wednesday 5 April 2006. The article specifies that “brokers expect (the completion of the) gold souk to increase value of shares”.

sale are enormous in size, and it is uncertain whether their quantity or quality meet any sort of real demand. A gap between supply and demand would be catastrophic, and shows why it would be more prudent to integrate into the plan more middle and lower scale construction and activities downtown.⁴⁷

Today, we are forced to note that this is indeed what has happened. Nevertheless, Hariri and Solidere have been able to activate their worldwide network of influential friends and sponsors to promote the property developed by Solidere and to create demand. They have obviously succeeded up to a certain extent. Response has come, but to a significant extent it has come from outside of Lebanon, mainly from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries where petrodollars of protracted economic growth has fuelled demand for property. This had not stopped but rather increased, it seems, more than a year after the July 2006 War.

It should be noted that, unlike other contexts, the Beirut city centre has never been home to communities of urban poor or marginalised people excluded from society. On the contrary, in the case of Beirut the inhabitants of the zone that concerns us here were almost exclusively well-to-do Lebanese. Before the Lebanese Wars (1975-1990) the centre attracted a wide diversity of visitors, dwellers, inhabitants and merchants of different material. In contrast, after the reconstruction the centre has been repopulated by a different part of population: rather exclusively high-income national and international residents of Beirut who can afford the prices of the uniformly reconstructed neighbourhoods. The original blend of heterogeneity mingling that characterised the pre-war souqs has disappeared and it is evident that not everyone feels at home.

Anno 2008, the appropriation procedures used by Hariri have become a well-known and a substantially documented fact. The opposition to Solidere is ongoing and a committee of defendants has been formed which organises activities to denounce what has happened and what is happening⁴⁸. This does not, however, prevent Solidere from having acquired a comfortable bargaining position as it has solidly imposed itself as the unavoidable actor and established a global reference in terms of urban reconstruction.

Notwithstanding the fact that most of these facts are quite well-known and substantially documented, we have chosen to highlight them here in some detail because the efforts of reconstruction in the Beirut city centre and the attempts to upgrade the infrastructure all over the country in the aftermath of the civil war provide interesting examples of transactions of property when it comes to study legal practices in a period of countrywide renewal.

III. Political Rivalry as a Catalyst (1990-2002)

Let us now return to the history of our mosque. We left our story about the physical evolution on the site at the early beginning of the civil war, by mentioning that some kind of panel had been installed on the ground indicating that a mosque was to arise here. Nevertheless, in the first years after the war none of this had survived. Virtually the only thing that could be seen was an undeveloped plot of land amidst a forest of cranes that populated the huge, rapidly and constantly evolving construction site that was the Beirut city centre.

However, to the close observer, and according to several eyewitnesses, as informal a structure as a tent was set up on the site. It is unclear, however, who exactly placed it there, who actually used this tent and how frequently but it appears that this tent was meant to allow local practicing labourers to pray when on a day of duty. Most probably, the tent was an initiative of the Muhammad al-Amin Association whose devout membership saw it as an affordable yet well-situated way to accomplish a

⁴⁷ BEYHUM, *The Crisis...*

⁴⁸ See, e.g. the articles in *The Daily Star* of 11 March 2004 and 18 July 2007, which show that members of the Daouq family are active in the property-owners committee.

deed of pious charity. At the same time, it provided for a convenient forum, especially during the Friday prayer, to disseminate the association's members' points of view on matters of concern⁴⁹.

Next to the development of the urban area surrounding the planned mosque, another important factor contributed to a precipitation in the project of the mosque. This factor was the joint will of Dar al-Fatwa and Rafiq Hariri to exclude the Muhammad al-Amin Association as an actor. This eviction was eventually achieved through a marriage of convenience between the Mufti and the Prime minister who wanted to curtail what they labelled as the extremist elements who had come to dominate the Association.

We must nevertheless be a bit more elaborate about the context and circumstances in which this pact between both actors materialised, since the alliance that contributed to a breakthrough in the construction of the mosque was not as self-evident as it may appear *ex post*. Here again, we will focus on procedures and dynamics and try to single out some of the legal practices that coincided in this struggle.

The enthusiasm of Dar al-Fatwa, stimulated and embodied by the will of the Mufti of the Lebanese Republic, Sheikh Muhammad Rashid Qabbani, appears to have been fuelled by a number of factors. First, there was the explicit willingness to go on with the project of building the Amin mosque and to turn it into a beacon of Islamic presence in Beirut. The fore-mentioned statement testifies of this ambition as follows:

Dar al-Fatwa (...) took upon its shoulder together with the DGIA the work of realising this hope to let this mosque become a landmark among the landmarks of Islamic civilisation in Lebanon and more specifically in the capital Beirut⁵⁰.

Next to this, three more factors must be taken into appreciation. First, according to a longstanding tradition in Lebanon and not unlike common practice in other (Middle Eastern) countries and confessions, leaders of religious communities yield considerable influence over political affairs⁵¹. Thus, as the leader and representative of a major religious community, the Mufti of the Lebanese Republic is a major political actor. Like any political actor, he is eager to show and, if possible, increase his legitimacy. As separate research has thoroughly suggested, this concern over and quest for legitimacy can be said to be especially true for the institution of Dar al-Fatwa at the period under study. The Mufti, widely seen as the candidate championed by Hariri, had been elected into office on 28 December 1996, merely hours after an institutional reform –masterminded by advisers close to Hariri– had modified the voting procedure⁵². As a newly appointed leader in search of credibility, the

⁴⁹ With decades of hindsight the idea of an informal mosque in a tent may appear strange, especially given the fact that several other mosques are available in the surroundings, but one should not forget that the nearest mosques, the Amir Assaf and the Omari mosque, were themselves under reconstruction at that time, i.e. in the 1990s. Therefore, as long as the constructions went on, those labourers who wished to perform their prayers found under the tent a suitable place of worship.

⁵⁰ The word *ma'lam* (landmark) is important here because it allows not only creating a rime but also because of the connected meanings of the word. The most basic significations of the root 'ayn-lâm-mîm are linked to notions like "teaching" or "knowing", an example being *'ilm* (knowledge) or *'alam* (banner). The use of the word *ma'lam* for landmark therefore translates the intention to convey a message: to teach something, namely that 'this' [i.e. the mosque] is part of the Islamic civilisation. All of this is conveniently expressed in the word *ma'lam* and to be sure it is noticed, the formula stresses it by adding the plural form (*ma'âlim*), a common style figure in Arabic literature.

⁵¹ See e.g. Fuad Ishak KHURI, *Imams and Emirs. State, Religion and Sects in Islam*, London : Saqi, 1991; Dale EICKELMAN & James PISCATORI, *Muslim Politics*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004; Theodoros KOUTROUBAS, *L'action politique et diplomatique du Saint Siège au Moyen-Orient 1978-1992*, Louvain-la-Neuve : Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2006.

⁵² See: ROUGIER, *Everyday Jihad...*, p. 130-131. Sheikh Muhammad Rashid Qabbani had been interim mufti since the assassination of his predecessor, Sheikh Hassan Khaled, on 16 May 1989. This means that Sheikh Qabbani and Hariri rose to political prominence in Lebanon around the same time, i.e. by the end of the 1980s.

On the assassination of Hassan Khaled, see: William W. HARRIS, *Faces of Lebanon. Sects, War and Global Extensions*, Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1997, p. 255.

Mufti had to earn his credentials among his constituency and, in this respect the construction of a mosque was a welcome opportunity to do so⁵³.

Moreover, two remaining motives, shared by Hariri, affected the Mufti's position. To start with, both leaders may have viewed the construction of the mosque as a means to epitomise the regained political strength of the Sunni community in post-war Lebanon. Indeed, one of the major shifts since the Taif Agreement (1989) is the enhancement in the prerogatives of the Prime Minister at the expense of the President's powers. As such, this landmark mosque can be understood as the symbolic crown on the work of those within the Sunni community who laboured for more influence within the Lebanese political system⁵⁴.

Next to this, Mufti Qabbani and Prime Minister Hariri found each other to be on the same wavelength on another issue too. Both leaders aspired to embody and promote a moderate form of Sunni Islam, thereby opposing and rejecting those preachers who denigrated the idea of Lebanon as a model of religious pluralism and who condemned the "*jahiliya*" prevailing among "corrupted" regimes of modern Arab states who collaborated themselves with "infidel" powers. Since, as we have mentioned, the Muhammad al-Amin Association had installed an unauthorised, informal mosque on the grounds of Solidere at the end of the 1990s, this issue of struggle against Islamic extremists fostered an alliance between Dar al-Fatwa and Rafiq al-Hariri, based on their shared opposition to the Muhammad al-Amin Association.

By that time, another kind of antagonism had come to influence Hariri's position towards the mosque. For, until then, Samir Kassir recalls Hariri to have been opposed to building a mosque on this prime location⁵⁵. According to Kassir, Hariri's opposition was inspired by two reasons: the first being the fact that, as Muslim who considered himself to be pious but/and moderated, Hariri didn't want religious markers "on the postcard of Beirut"⁵⁶. The second reason for his opposition was that, as a businessman, Hariri didn't want to sacrifice one of the most expensive parcels of Solidere to a mosque, a building unlikely to generate any added value.

So, what triggered Rafiq Hariri, to make a radical U-turn in his position towards the plans for the Muhammad al-Amin mosque? In order to answer this question, it is important to recall the –by now legendary- friction and strained relation between Hariri and Emile Lahoud, then Commander in Chief of the Lebanese Army. Hariri unsuccessfully tried to avoid the latter from becoming President of the Republic in 1998. This animosity between the country's two most powerful officials has been quite paralysing for countless political issues in Lebanon⁵⁷. This vicious atmosphere affected the construction of the al-Amin mosque as well.

⁵³ It is interesting to observe that the dynamic of transforming the « image of the city » through the construction of a monumental mosque is not confined to Lebanon. The congregational Hassan II mosque in Casablanca stands witness to a similar process. For more details on that project (including some similarities and differences), see : CATTEDRA, Raffaele & JANATI, M'hammed, « Espace du religieux, espace de citoyenneté, espace de mouvement : les territoires des mosquées au Maroc » in BENNANI-CHRAÏBI, Mounia & FILLEULE, Olivier (dirs.), *Résistances et protestations dans les sociétés musulmanes*, Paris : Presses de Science Po, 2003, p. 127-175.

⁵⁴ Marwan Iskandar, in an avowedly partisan biography, documents Hariri's contribution in this effort to empower the Sunni Muslims by searching a "pro-active role of acute political awareness" for them as well as "participation that would contribute to the rebirth of Lebanon". In what Iskandar calls "an uphill struggle to restore Sunni credibility" Hariri contributed his own "perseverance, as well as substantial resources provided by the Saudis". See: ISKANDAR, *Rafik Hariri and ...*, p. 163-164.

⁵⁵ Samir Kassir in an interview featured by "Le kiosque arabe" on Radio France Internationale (RFI), 8 April 2005.

⁵⁶ "il (RH) ne voulait pas d'emblème religieux sur la place des martyrs, sur la carte postale de Beyrouth".

⁵⁷ For a detailed account of this process, see: CORM, *Le Liban contemporain...*, especially chapter 11, p. 267-292. Alternatively, turn to the somewhat partisan but revealing BLANFORD, *Killing MrLebanon...*, especially chapter 4, p. 71-99.

In an apparent attempt to target Hariri within his own constituency, President Lahoud, a secular and military-minded figure of maronite confession, saw an opportunity to weaken the position of his political opponent on his own territory, namely within the Sunni community of Beirut. President Lahoud reportedly invited Al-Walid bin Talal, a Saudi prince among the world's richest men with alleged ambitions in Lebanese politics, to participate in the financing of the mosque. In 2001, Al-Walid, who is connected to Lebanon through his mother, Mona as-Solh –the daughter of Riad as-Solh⁵⁸, contributed two million dollar as a donation for purchasing parts of the parcel⁵⁹.

As we have shown, until then, Rafiq Hariri's attitude had been one of opposition to the mosque. From that point, however, Rafiq Hariri found himself in a position where circumstances forced him to act. He couldn't consider not contributing and being perceived as stingy or sidelined by a rival on a major project in his own backyard. On the other hand, he couldn't consider either to make only a symbolic contribution since this would be seen as merely endorsing an initiative of notable political competitors.

Hariri reacted in a way that revealed both the pragmatic and determined nature of his character, as well as his sense for challenge and grandeur. In true Hariri-style he became closely involved in every phase of the successive operations and personally oversaw every single step in the construction process, thus clearly putting his mark on the project. Thereby, typically, money was not an obstacle but rather an instrument.

The gradual move towards the appropriation of a project he initially felt no lust for, clearly is the most striking and dominant dynamic when analysing Hariri's association with the mosque.

This U-turn in Hariri's position is a good illustration of Hariri's double-sided position as a Lebanese and as a Sunni politician. On one hand he carefully nourished his image as a truly Lebanese statesman, a consensual leader who enjoyed massive, trans-communitarian support, as his popularity among Christian bourgeoisie suggested. On the other hand, assuming, as he was, the highest public office available for a Lebanese Sunni, he was eager to uphold his reputation as a devout and practicing Muslim, essential assets of a true *za'im* (communal leader). Hariri took great pains to carefully cultivate both profiles, a dynamic that allowed him to mobilise whichever portrait would serve his interest best. The case of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque stands as a good illustration of how easily he could shift from one profile to another.

Thus, most importantly, a year after the contribution made by Al-Walid bin Talal, the alliance between Hariri and the Mufti paid off. The Prime Minister was able to obtain, with the backing of Dar al-Fatwa, the signature of decree number 8572, by both the Minister of Interior, Elias al-Murr and President Lahoud. This decree, published in the Official Gazette on 31 August 2002⁶⁰, declared the Muhammad al-Amin Association to be illegal and dissolved by virtue of law, thus removing perhaps the biggest obstacle to the actual construction of the mosque.

⁵⁸ Riad as-Solh (°Beirut, 1894) was the first prime minister of independent Lebanon, from 1943 to 1945 and again between 1946 and 1951. That same year saw his violent death as he was assassinated in Amman (Jordan), only months after leaving office. His elimination appeared to be linked to the execution of Antun Saadeh, founder of the Syrian Socialist National Party, by the Lebanese authorities two years earlier, in 1949.

⁵⁹ See: an-Nahar, "milyûnâ dûlâr min al-walid bin Talâl li-masjid muhammad al-'amin" in *an-Nahar*, 6th of December 2001, p. 5. [Two million dollars from al-Walid bin Talal for the Muhammad al-Amin mosque] Riz KHAN, *Alwaleed. Businessman, billionaire, prince*, New York: William Morrow, 2005, p. 318. This book is the tycoon's authorised biography. BLANFORD, *Killing Mr Lebanon...*, p. 85 qualifies bin Talal as an outspoken supporter of President Emile Lahoud.

⁶⁰ Al-Jarida ar-Rasmiya, N° 49, 31 August 2002, p. 5807.

IV. The actual construction (2003-2005)

In this section we will focus on a selected number of actors and issues involved in the relatively short phase of actual construction of the mosque, in order to highlight how different interests clashed. Special attention will go to the procedures brought up to regulate occurring conflicts.

Now that he had established himself as the principal sponsor, Hariri was able to have a determinant impact on the plans. This was greatly facilitated by the fact that he commissioned Oger Liban, his own contracting company, to carry out this new, valuable contract. By late 2002, the development of the site was about to start. In order to work quietly, Oger Liban had decided to enclose the whole parcel of the construction by a fence of panels that would allow labourers to work in an undisrupted manner, to create a construction site with a space to store material and equipment and to prevent the works to be hindered by all too curious passers-by. Such a lack of transparency may have been customary practice all over the BCD, it did not, however, prevent several Lebanese from informing themselves about what was happening behind these walls. An-Nahar gave a voice to this outcry by publishing several articles on the matter⁶¹. It must be mentioned that, when the Omari mosque was being rehabilitated and enlarged in similar conditions, a polemic had erupted in the press⁶².

One of the issues brought up in the case of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque concerned the Roman remnants, laid bare merely weeks after digging works for the foundations had started, in 2002. These ruins were of particular interest to archaeologists and historians of ancient Beirut, who yearned for an occasion to investigate them. Thus, a bargaining process started between, on the one hand, contractors and developers of the site, who pressed for a swift continuation of building activities, and, on the other hand, archaeologists and the Directorate-General of Antiquities (DGA), who devoted all available energy to their quest for time and money to allow more serious excavations in optimal circumstances. Permission and funding was finally obtained and excavations on site started in late October 2002⁶³, but only for a limited period of time and under strict conditions since no more than a handful of researchers were allowed on the site –without permission to make photos⁶⁴.

The series of excavations nevertheless allowed discovering a completely new urban pattern, with a different street grid than had hitherto been assumed. A well-preserved section of the *decumanus maximus*, a 27 metres wide street with a portico on each side, was unearthed, as well as numerous mosaics, wall paintings, a fountain and many more artefacts. The material was of high quality and shed new light on the alignment of the different axes, with three roman streets running east-west and one axis connecting the city north-south. At that time, the DGA and Solidere even held brainstorming sessions about the feasibility of developing a public access to an underground gallery that would allow visitors to pass under the mosque and under the neighbouring cathedral to see the *decumanus*. However, until now it is unlikely that this idea will ever materialise.

It should be noted that Solidere is responsible for the development of the BCD and, therefore, has the authority to define and impose what it calls “the master plan” –i.e. the technical guidelines, including all architectural aspects- to virtually every piece of real estate in its sector. Some buildings, mainly religious and government buildings, however, are exempted from this plan. This doesn’t mean that Solidere had nothing to say when it came to the construction of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque, but Oger Liban, the company selected as responsible for the construction of the mosque, made the

⁶¹ See: an-Nahar, 26th of April 2001, p. 5; an-Nahar, 21st of December 2001, p. 6; an-Nahar, 20th of September 2002, p.15 and an-Nahar, 3d of October 2002, p.12.

⁶² See e.g. the article by Assem Salam in an-Nahar on 6 February 2003 and a response by Hassan Hallaq on 25 February 2003. For an overview and contextualisation of this outcry, see : Carine MANSOUR & Maïa LAHOUD, “Quand le patrimoine devient affaire politique” in *Sabahouna*, June 2003, p.28-29.

⁶³ Al-Mustaqbal, 28 October 2002, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Interview with Montaha Saghiye, Beirut, 23 March 2006.

final decisions⁶⁵. As a consequence, it occurred that Oger Liban had its own ideas about the design as well as about the implementation of certain parts of the mosque and how to implement them on the ground.

It should be recalled that Oger Liban primarily supervised and coordinated works, as it outsourced many of the construction activities to as much as thirty five external contracting companies⁶⁶. At Oger Liban, the architectural planning of the mosque was in hands of a team of engineers under the expertise and leadership of Azmi Fakhouri, an architectural engineer by training who, like many of his contemporaries, had completed his studies with the help of the Hariri Foundation. Mr. Fakhouri had gained his credentials while working on several other projects for Hariri, including the Hind Hijazi Mosque and the Bahaeddine Hariri Mosque in Saida⁶⁷. Fakhouri and his team worked out the directives they had received directly from Hariri.

Thus, the first stone of the Muhammad al-Amin Mosque was laid on the first day of Ramadan 2002 (6 November), both by Sheikh Qabbani, the Mufti and Rafiq Hariri, Prime Minister. The first concrete for the foundations was poured on 3 October 2003 and by March 2005 the raw construction of the whole building, including the 65 meter high minarets and the 48 meter high dome, had been finalised. The total surface covered almost 4000 square metres and the built up area covered over 11000 square metres. The calculated surface per prayer is 1,25 metre on 0,6 metre per prayer, or a total of 0,75 m², thus allowing space for more than 3000 believers. The building provides an additional mezzanine for 800 female worshippers.

The stone used for the Ottoman-inspired⁶⁸ scheme is the Yellow Riyadh Stone (no Lebanese quarry could guarantee to pledge the necessary volumes of one stone) and the studios of the Saudi Sheikh Othman Taha prepared the calligraphy. The design of the mosque's interior was in hands of Nabil Dada, a Lebanese decorator who had worked for Hariri on numerous occasions. As for the characteristically blue colour for the dome, it was a composition chosen by Hariri himself out of a selection of blues compiled by an Italian laboratory after almost a year of try outs. The total cost of the project is estimated around 30 million US dollars.

Before as well as during the construction works, the engineers at Oger Liban were confronted with a great deal of technical challenges. It is here that we come to see some of the more informal practices of negotiating space in a very technical way, a way that influenced the final form of the mosque. Indeed, Oger had to translate the wishes and directives of all the actors involved into a feasible building within budgetary and spatial limits. If the actors' interests and intentions were not antagonistic by definition, it should be clear that the desires and objectives of all these actors were hardly compatible and even less complementary either. On the contrary, the actors involved clearly had divergent objectives. To be more explicit, Solidere was initially opposed to the construction of a monumental mosque and did everything possible to downscale the project so as to make it fit into the urban context and buildings and projects surrounding the mosque. Dar al-Fatwa, from its side, had clearly expressed its ambition to turn the Muhammad al-Amin mosque into a landmark of Islamic civilisation in Lebanon. Rafiq Hariri, once dragged into the project, had come to consider the construction of this mosque as one of the coronation of his reconstruction efforts in the BCD and one in which his prestige and reputation was at stake. Oger Liban, from its side, had constraints of technical and financial order and wanted the project to be carried out as good and as fast as possible. These actors were the actors with decision power, other actors, such as neighbours, archaeologists and residents of Beirut were all directly or indirectly concerned but had very limited means at their

⁶⁵ The executive director who oversaw the project at Oger Liban was dr. Nazih Hariri, a cousin of Rafiq.

⁶⁶ Interview with Azmi Fakhouri, Beirut, 5 July 2006.

⁶⁷ This mosque was commissioned by Rafiq Hariri in honour of his father, whose tomb is located just outside the mosque, to the north. The chief architect of this mosque was Saleh Lamei, an Egyptian architect. At the occasion of the mosque's official inauguration ceremony, in March 2006, Liban Post issued a stamp bearing a picture of the mosque.

⁶⁸ Although the architect insists on the fact that a wide variety of other influences are manifestly present as well.

disposal in order to influence decisions. This diversity in objectives among the various actors is important to take into account because it is here that the construction of a religious building reveals its political dimensions.

One example of these opposite objectives and the informal modes of ordinary practices that surrounded the actual construction on a daily basis became clear through a problem that arose in the northwestern corner of the parcel. The problem was that this corner was not, initially, part of the acquired lands but, on the contrary, a part of Solidere land committed by the latter to accommodate another project, namely the Garden of Forgiveness. The problem was considerable since the orientation of the main entrance was scheduled to be exactly on this plot of land, towards this northwestern corner, facing the heart of BCD –the Nejme Square- and thus completing, in a way, one of the two missing spokes which depart from the square. Early drafts of the more than three hundred twenty schemes prepared by Mr Fakhouri's team as well as several maps published by Solidere, clearly indicate the intention of orienting the main entrance of the mosque towards the northwestern corner (Fig. 2).

The problem was all the more serious since the 2,3 hectares project of the Garden of Forgiveness was a high-profile initiative bound to become a “paragon of social integration” in order to “offer an important neutral location with a multi communal history” and to serve as “a meeting point for Lebanon’s many communities” (Fig. 3). Solidere had encountered much difficulties in finding a suitable location for the project which was closely monitored by international ngo’s because of the unique opportunity to commit a public space in reconstructed Beirut to the sensitive issue of reconciliation by using “foundations of the past to build foundations for the future” and by providing “a place for individuals to reflect on their collective memory” with the hope to “nurture a renewed sense of common identity” among Lebanese⁶⁹.

Solidere insisted on securing a passage between the mosque and the cathedral that would allow visitors to the garden to connect Rue Weygand with Rue Emir Beshir. Solidere came under pressure twice to sell more land. For Oger Liban, the problem was significant because not including this part would have major effects on stability of the building and force to relocate the main entrance. This problem turned out to be the biggest challenge for the architect and he had to muster all of his talent to find a solution. In the end, a compromise was struck which allowed both projects to go ahead without too much trouble. Nevertheless, a permanent visual reference to this bargaining will remain.

The solution consisted in Solidere giving up an additional plot of land but obtaining a guarantee to a passage for visitors to the Garden under a vaulted structured covering the northwestern corner at the level of the first elevation. In doing so, the trapezoidal form of the parcel and the stability of the original plan were secured but the main entrance of the mosque was now transferred under another vaulted hall, to the northeastern corner of the parcel, which gave direct access to Martyrs Square and no longer to Sahat an-Nejmeh.

We have highlighted this rather technical problem because we believe that it is telling of how the different actors negotiated and finally settled a dispute about a plot of land. It illustrates how negotiating over space leaves physical marks.

Another example of clashing interests and negotiating actors can be found in the reaction of the ecclesiastic establishment responsible for the Saint-George Maronite Cathedral, located just next to the mosque.

In our attempt to focus on the practices accompanying acquisition and construction of property, in the context of Beirut, we have tried to stress the dynamic nature of this process. The constant interactions between different communities, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes confrontational;

⁶⁹ Quotations are made from the Solidere brochure presenting the project. Solidere, *Hadiqat As-Samah*, Beirut : Solidere, 2004?

sometimes along intra confessional lines and sometimes transgressing confessional boundaries, is an essential feature the Lebanese society –be it in violent⁷⁰ or in peaceful⁷¹ times. As often when it comes to communication, what is being said is less important than the way it is being said. This is especially true in a context where religious matters are extremely sensitive issues. As such, the interplay with other buildings in the surroundings of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque, and especially with the religious architecture in its vicinity, greatly affected the construction and use of the mosque and continues to do so. Therefore, we believe that a brief look at the perceptions of the mosque by its neighbour is pertinent in the framework of this paper.

The Saint George Maronite Cathedral (Fig. 4) (whose plans are inspired upon the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome) was built to replace a church of the same name, which had become too small for the growing community. Archbishop Joseph Debs (r.1872-1907), who had decided to increase the visibility of the Maronite community in Beirut, inaugurated the cathedral in 1894⁷². After the end of the war, at the initiative of the archbishop of Beirut, the cathedral was restored (at a cost of eight million dollars) “because it had not been used for 25 years and wild herbs had invaded the cathedral”⁷³. To emphasise the importance of the cathedral “which is to Maronites of Lebanon what the Notre Dame is to the Catholics of France”, the inauguration ceremony of the restored cathedral, in 2000, was presided over by Patriarch Sfeir, “in presence of President Hariri and Cardinal Lustiger of Paris”.

The “gargantuan” mosque literally dominates and “dwarfs”⁷⁴ the adjacent cathedral in such a way that many visitors (including residents and non-residents; Muslims, Christians or agnostics) perceived it as a form of provocation. The least that can be said is that the hegemonic ambition and connotation of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque went neither unnoticed nor without criticism⁷⁵. In fact, the mosque led to a redefinition of the cathedral. This became evident during the funeral ceremony for the assassinated Minister of Tourism, Pierre Gemayel when attendants spoke of “the mosque side of the church” to indicate where exactly they were sitting⁷⁶.

Archbishop Matar, eager to respond to the construction of the mosque regardless of political conjunctures, ordered for the preparation of a visible answer to the new mosque. He commissioned a well-known architect to draw plans for a campanile that would “not reach higher but at the same height” as the minarets. As a result detailed plans have been finalised and approved and the construction of the new campanile is now under way. It will arise in the form of a 65 metres high clock tower on the street side, to the west of the cathedral. Archbishop Matar explains how, shortly before the construction of the mosque,

Hariri came to see me and tell me that they would build a mosque there. He told me that it would be the height of the cathedral, “but what do you want, in Islam the domes are high”. But they created a monumental structure that occults the cathedral and the Maronite presence. In fact, they wanted a presence on Martyrs’ Square. So, in reaction we will construct the campanile. I have asked Sheikh Pierre Khoury⁷⁷ to prepare the plans by looking at Saint Marc in Venice and the Pisa Tower for inspiration. The campanile will be 65 metres high, not higher but the same height as the

⁷⁰ See : Theodor HANF, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon : Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation*, London: IB Tauris, 1993 ; Marwan ROWAYHEB, “Lebanese Militias: A New Perspective” in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, N°2, p. 303-318, March 2006.

⁷¹ See : Hanna ZIADEH, *Sectarianism and Intercommunal Nation-Building in Lebanon*, London: Hurst, 2006.

⁷² On the cathedral, see : Tûbiyâ ABI ‘ÂD, *Katidrâ’iyya Mar Jirjis al-Mârânîyya*, Beirut: Chahine Printing Press, 2000.

⁷³ Interview with Archbishop Boulos Matar, Beirut, 27 July 2007.

⁷⁴ The terms are quotations from : KHALAF, *Heart of Beirut...*

⁷⁵ Several “Muslim” commentators expressed themselves against the construction of the mosque, most notably, among several others, Assem Salam. Interview of 28 March 2006.

⁷⁶ Robert FISK in *The Independent*, 26th of November 2006.

⁷⁷ Pierre Khoury, is a Lebanese (Maronite) architect who has designed several highly visible buildings in Lebanon, including a monumental cathedral on Mount Harissa and the emblematic UN House in central Beirut. He died in 2005.

minarets. In fact, I do not reproach to Hariri to have built a mosque, I do reproach to him to have built a mosque that is disproportionate in relation to the city. (...) This is a kind of showing off, to attract attention. By the way, from an architectural point of view, this is not a big success; Solidere never photographed it and actually tries to avoid displaying it in their promotion brochures. It is a bit like the Tour Montparnasse in Paris, everyone wants to be inside in order not to see it.

According to some, this step must be understood in an increasingly bothersome contest for visibility by mosques and churches in the downtown area⁷⁸. Competition is not only created about possessing the highest minaret or church tower but there's also a challenge about featuring the most audible, i.e. loudest possible, 'azân⁷⁹ and ringing of church bells.

However one wishes to interpret such a spectacular reaction by the Maronite Church, we believe it is important to mention it because it shows that the mosque clearly interacts, communicates with its environment and, as such, 'works' or succeeds in functioning as an Islamic landmark, as some of its conceivers intended.

V. The installation of the *darîh* next to the mosque and its effects (2005–2008)

In a spectacular way, all of this competition and rivalry was completely forgotten during the dramatic events that followed Hariri's assassination. On Monday 14 February 2005, a massive explosion shook the city of Beirut and changed the course of the country's political history. As Hariri's impressive motorcade drove next to the Saint George Hotel in Ayn el Mryasseh⁸⁰, around a ton of trinitrotoluene (TNT) was detonated and killed more than twenty people, including ex-premier Hariri.

On Wednesday 16 February, amidst national and international indignation, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese joined the funeral procession from Hariri's residence in Qoraytem to the Muhammad al-Amin mosque and the subsequent ceremony. This turned out to be a highly politicised event, as the Hariri family had announced that (pro-)Syrian state representatives, including President Lahoud, would not be welcome at the gathering.

Subsequently, the family decided to bury Hariri and his bodyguards on a plot of land bordering the Muhammad al-Amin mosque on Martyrs' Square. The decision to install Hariri's tomb in Beirut was taken overnight and, just as the decision to turn his funeral into an anti-Syrian event, the decision to lay the martyred president to rest in Beirut too was a political statement. A statement which contradicted existing plans, since Hariri had, apparently, been expected to be laid to rest next to his father's, in his family hometown of Saïda⁸¹.

Virtually from the very first moment of Rafiq Hariri's burial on Martyrs' Square onwards, vast amounts of people amassed at the improvised tomb and soon, the site became a popular attraction. Indeed, as a consequence of his accomplishments and because of his international radiance, combined with the shocking violence of his assassination but also as the result of careful planning, political

⁷⁸ Angus Gavin, Beirut, 16 March 2006.

⁷⁹ Both the 'azân and the ringing of church bells are often being electronically amplified. In this context, see: KHAN, Naveeda, "Making Sound Matter: The Contestation over Azan in Contemporary Pakistan" in GILMARTIN, David; LAWRENCE, Bruce & STEWART, Tony (eds.), *Visions of Community: The South Asian Muslim Imaginaire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

⁸⁰ Ironically enough, this Hotel is an iconic building that had not been reconstructed to its pre-war glory, due to a conflict between its owner, Fadi Khoury, on one the hand and Hariri and Solidere, on the other hand, about property rights. In fact, the Saint George Hotel was among the most visible contestations of Solidere's activities in BCD. For more details, see: Warren Singh-Bartlett, "St. George and Solidere do battle over soul BCD" in *The Daily Star* of 23 February 2001. In completion of the official reports of the UN International Independent Investigation Commission published online by the UN Security Council, the most credible report so far on the assassination of Hariri is: BLANFORD, *Killing Mr. Lebanon...*

⁸¹ Interview with Youssef Haidar, Beirut, 28 June 2006.

manoeuvring and a dose of well-aimed propaganda, Rafiq Hariri acquired the status of a mythical martyr, *ar-ra'is ash-shahid* (the martyr president) whose tomb has evolved into an improvised shrine, complete with large life-size portraits, flowers and candles.

As a consequence, and because of the events that followed, this newly created space soon acquired a prominent place in Lebanese public life. Scenes of Lebanese⁸² and foreign⁸³ dignitaries paying their respect or local basketball teams celebrating their victories⁸⁴ at Hariri's tomb are particularly significant moments in this respect. These visits of ordinary people⁸⁵ as well as celebrities have contributed to shape the character of the *darîh* (Fig. 5) which has de facto evolved into a modern pilgrimage site⁸⁶.

Just as the mosque can be said to have started under a tent, so too did the mausoleum develop out of a tent. A more permanent structure –to be designed by one of Hariri's sons- is bound to replace the actual, temporary large hall created by the tent structure⁸⁷. What is more important is that the mosque has become inextricably linked to the *darîh*. This is not only due to the extreme physical proximity between the mosque and the emerging mausoleum. In fact, the mosque has acquired a completely different political meaning since the spectacular death of Hariri. If before 14 February 2005, some Christians felt outspokenly humiliated by the mosque, the installation of the *darîh* and the events during the month following that tragical Valentine Day have had an attenuating effect on the mosque; all of a sudden, it seemed, the Muhammad al-Amin mosque became more associated with the events that accompanied Hariri's assassination, lost its dominant character and found itself transformed into a symbol of unity and understanding⁸⁸. At that moment, the mosque seemed no longer to derange and appeared to pass almost unnoticed, even by outspoken Maronites⁸⁹.

At the same time, because of its high popularity, the *darîh* became a useful tool for communication and a convenient instrument in the political liturgy for members close to Hariri. As such, the *darîh* only added more importance to the mosque and created it de facto into one big sanctuary devoted to the cult of the slain president. Hariri's family and sympathisers have carefully and diligently reinforced the connection of Hariri with the mosque by using the *darîh*. One example of this is the display, at the *darîh*, of a special series of post stamps, issued in commemoration of his death, on which Hariri is featured four times; one bears Hariri's portrait next to a minaret and a church tower of

⁸² The Secretary-General of Hezbollah, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah came to pay his respects repeatedly, see e.g. a visit, together with MP Saad al-Hariri, after the second day of the "National Dialogue" featured in *Sharq al-Awsat* of 4th of March 2006, p.5.

⁸³ The images of President Jacques Chirac are the most well-known examples but other dignitaries such as Kofi Annan (al-Liwa, 29 August 2006) and others are to be mentioned as well.

⁸⁴ As reported by al-Liwa in April 2006. Syndicates came to visit the mosque on the eve of their strike, in a move to add significance to their action.

⁸⁵ People of all ages visit the site: just married couples, youngsters, parents taking their children on a trip, elder persons, tourists,...

⁸⁶ At one point, people made a point of passing by the *darîh* as a normal activity to be combined with a visit to a restaurant or a cinema. This concept was coined in the Lebanese expression: *ciné-diner-darîh*.

⁸⁷ Azmi Fakhouri, Beirut, July 2007.

⁸⁸ Such as on the occasion of 14th of March 2005, when a million people seemed to transform the mosque into a forceful symbol of national unity. Cfr. the book published by an-Nahar on the occasion of what has been called "the Beirut Spring", "Independence05" or the "Cedar Revolution". See: VARIOUS, *The Beirut Spring. Independence 05*, Beirut: Dar an-Nahar & Quantum Communications, 2005.

⁸⁹ One Lebanese interviewee of Maronite confession told us: "before [2005], the mosque used to arouse my anger, I didn't like the way the mosque was imposed next to the cathedral. But now [March 2006], all of this is forgotten, it's almost as if I don't see the mosque anymore".

the same height, collated next to the well known statue of the martyrs and another stamp shows a small portrait next to the large Muhammad al-Amin mosque⁹⁰.

It must be noted however that, soon after Hariri's assassination, two broad political coalitions emerged: the 8th March (in reference to an enormous pro-Syrian manifestation organised by Hezbollah⁹¹) and the 14th March (in reference to an even bigger manifestation organised to commemorate the first month after Hariri's assassination). Both of these camps evolved considerably as weeks and months went by and developed into the main new political actors of the post-Hariri era in Lebanon. The gap between these two opposing currents only widened during 2005, worsened after the July 2006 War and developed into deep mistrust during the economic and socio-political deadlock of 2007. That same year saw both camps, each with their respective international allies, pitched even more fiercely against each other over the highly problematic issues of electing a successor to Emile Lahoud and finding an acceptable, power-sharing formula.

Astonishingly, this political cleavage has had spatial repercussions which have affected the *darîh* and the mosque⁹². Quite revealingly, if Hariri's tomb, at one (short) moment⁹³ –i.e. immediately after his assassination– seemed to have had the potential to develop into a national mausoleum that could attract visitors of almost all confessions, the gradual degeneration of the political situation soon prevented this. As time evolved, a rather contrary dynamic emerged, which transformed⁹⁴ the *darîh* and the neighbouring mosque into a space clearly belonging to the 14th March camp⁹⁵.

By December 2006, the 8th March camp⁹⁶ had confirmed this dynamic of spatialisation of power through launching a major sit-in ('*i'tisâm*)⁹⁷ at central squares of Beirut⁹⁸ (Fig. 6) and by organising a subsequent "siege" of the downtown area –from the Saray (the Prime Minister's offices) to the al-Amin mosque. In occupying and contesting "14th March space", the 8th March supporters responded by occupying rival space and turning it into a clearly marked political space of their own. Thus, the stalemate acquired visible expression and, at the occasion of the second annual commemoration of Hariri's assassination, on 14 February 2007, the mosque was surrounded by barbed wire, as a 'safety' measure.

From then on, in order to access the heart of BCD in 2007, one literally had to chose sides; either entering through the tent camp⁹⁹ installed by the supporters of 8 March or passing by the *darîh*, thus paying respect to the 14 March camp. Thus, the mosque had been politically hijacked even before its inauguration.

⁹⁰ Liban Post, *Dhikra 'istishhâd ar-ra'îs rafiq al-harîrî – Commémoration du Martyre du Président Rafic Hariri*, 6000 LL, 2005.

⁹¹ In reference to 8 March 1963, which is the day the Ba'ath party came to power in Syria.

⁹² At one occasion towards the end of the year 2006, the Islamic scholar and preacher dr. Fathi Yakan, an ex-MP and ex-president of the Jama'a Islâmiya in Lebanon, led a prayer on Martyrs' Square, just in front of the mosque. To many Lebanese, Christians and Muslims alike, this 'use' of the mosque was the vision of a fearful future for their country. The conservative minded francophone newspaper *L'Orient le Jour* qualified Yakan as a "prédicateur fondamentaliste" in its edition of 13 December 2006.

⁹³ See for example the very hopeful document: VARIOUS, *L'espoir en lettres de sang... 14 février 2005-14 février 2006, la Révolution du Cèdre en marche*, Supplément de *L'Orient le jour* paru le 13 février 2006.

⁹⁴ For example, each time a significant step towards the establishment of the UN Special tribunal for Lebanon was taken, this was considered to be a political victory and, therefore, a small, framed copper plate would celebrate this.

⁹⁵ Mainly consisting of Hariri's Future Bloc, Jumblatt's PSP, and the remnants of Qornet Shehwan.

⁹⁶ Mainly: Hezbollah, Aoun's FPM, Amal and the Marada.

⁹⁷ The '*i'tisâm*' as an event can be understood as an ongoing dynamic of contesting the appropriation of space by Hariri and his allies ever since he came to power. The « occupants » and participants in the sit-in perpetuate this resistance. The connotations of the term '*i'tisâm*' (اعتصام) (safeguarding, resistance, preservation) are therefore meaningful.

⁹⁸ Most notably Riad as-Solh Square.

⁹⁹ I am grateful to Zuhair Ghazzal for pointing out that the tent camp of 8th March is itself divided : in a grouping of tents belonging to the Aoun-led Free Patriotic Movement and the « Qawmi » (on the Saifi side of the sit-in) and a grouping of tents mainly staffed with militants from Amal and Hezbollah installed more to the west, on Riad Solh Square.

It is indeed important to note that all of this appropriation and contestation of “sacred” space has occurred even before the Muhammad al-Amin Mosque has been officially inaugurated. As a matter of fact, at the time of writing, an official inauguration ceremony had not yet taken place. This tardiance is noteworthy, if only because it stands in sharp contrast to the swift execution of construction works. A variety of reasons account for the fact that, more than two years after its completion, the mosque has not yet officially opened its doors to the public.

First, there was the explanation that the interior of the mosque was not yet finished¹⁰⁰. Then, properly organising the maintenance¹⁰¹ services seemed to be the obstacle and, later on, there was talk of a grand inaugural celebration¹⁰² with high profile international guests, scheduled for Ramadan or December 2006¹⁰³. Yet, the July War of 2006 came to obstruct these plans¹⁰⁴.

By now, it is clear that the inauguration is to become a major event with a political dimension. Just as it was the case with the inauguration of the Baha eddine al-Hariri mosque in Saida, the gathering for the official opening of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque is likely to be used as a forum to confirm the image of a powerful, well-connected and prosperous community, thanks to the work and contributions of the founder of the mosque. Moreover, an ambitious programme of cultural events is meant to be announced in order to promote the mosque as a venue with international resonance¹⁰⁵. The mosque is to become part of a memorial centre, designed to host artistic and cultural activities in line with Hariri’s. It is clear too, therefore, that such an event requires almost ideal circumstances and cannot take place amidst the prevailing political turmoil that has paralysed the country of the Cedar for far too long.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Shaykh Muhammad Noqqari, Beirut, 15 March 2006.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Azmi Fakhouri, Beirut, 3^d and 5th of July 2006.

¹⁰² It is interesting to mention the huge inauguration ceremony, which we attended in Saida –the hometown of the Hariris. Rafiq Hariri had commissioned the construction of a mosque there to honour his father Bahaa ad-Din. The location of this mosque, at the ‘entry’ of the city when coming from Beirut, isn’t void of political significance. This mosque, “the largest and the most beautiful in Lebanon” (dixit an-Nahar –see further), costed 12 million dollar. Lebanon’s most senior religious authorities attended this ceremony, which served as a general repetition for the consecration of the Muhammad al-Amin Mosque. For extensive press coverage on the inauguration of the Bahâ’ ad-Dîn al-Harîrî Mosque in Saida, see: an-Nahar of 21st of March 2006, p.13 (on the mosque) and an-Nahar, 25th of March 2006, p. 13 (on the ceremony). On that occasion publicity booklet prepared by Oger Liban was handed out. Oger Liban staff informed me that a similar but more substantial “book” is being prepared by them on the Muhammad al-Amin Mosque, to be distributed at its official opening.

¹⁰³ Interview with Redwan as-Sayyid, Beirut, July 2006.

¹⁰⁴ During a visit to the Muhammad al-Amin mosque in early July 2006, guided by the architect, we were allowed to take an extensive look inside the mosque and observe that the state-of-the-art interior was as good as completed and ready to receive and impress visitors.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Azmi Fakhouri, Beirut, July 2007.

Illustrations

Figure 1: General view of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque.



Picture by W. Vloeberghs, 2006.

Figure 2: The original Oger Liban design for the northwestern corner, with the entrance facing Sahat an-Nejmeh.



Picture of Oger documentation, taken by W. Vloeberghs, 2007.

Figure 3: Aerial view of the planned Garden of Forgiveness. On top, to the left of the Maronite cathedral, the empty space where the mosque now stands.



Picture from Solidere documentation, taken by W. Vloeberghs, 2008.

Figure 4: Saint-George Maronite cathedral, with the Muhammad al-Amin mosque behind it. Due to the perspective, the picture distorts the dimensions and makes the cathedral looking taller than it actually is.



Picture by W. Vloeberghs, 2006.

Figure 5: A woman standing in front of the *darîh*.



Picture by W. Vloeberghs, 2006.

Figure 6: The sit-in as seen on Riad as-Solh Square, with the mosque on the background.



Picture by W. Vloeberghs, 2007.

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