

The World Humanities Report

# Beyond the Garbage Politics of Emergency: The Paradox of Infrastructural Failure in Beirut's Peripheries

---

Sintia Issa



The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and the Human Science (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

© 2023 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

This work carries a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License. This license permits you to copy, distribute, and display this work as long as you mention and link back to the World Humanities Report, attribute the work appropriately (including both author and title), and do not adapt the content or use it commercially. For details, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>.

This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Issa, Sintia. *Beyond the Garbage Politics of Emergency: The Paradox of Infrastructural Failure in Beirut's Peripheries*. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

More information about the author can be found at the [end of this document](#).

# Beyond the Garbage Politics of Emergency: The Paradox of Infrastructural Failure in Beirut's Peripheries

Sintia Issa University of California, Santa Cruz

“The sea is dead,” laments Chaker, a fisherman in his eighties who made a living from the sea for fifty-five years at the harbor of Dora, just north of Beirut.<sup>1</sup> Since “they dumped the first shovel of trash into the sea,” he says, fish gradually disappeared.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), waste was dumped in Burj Hammūd, a predominantly Armenian neighborhood north of Beirut, near the fishing port. By the mid-1990s, the dumping ground had become “the garbage mountain,” a rancid, forty-two-meter-tall postwar landmark.<sup>3</sup> Millions of tons of waste (organic, industrial, and even toxic) have congealed in the decaying hodgepodge, releasing methane into the atmosphere and leaching toxins into the sea.<sup>4</sup> Their lives and livelihoods at stake, fishermen and residents organized and shut down the waste dump in summer 1997, but their struggle continues.<sup>5</sup>

When garbage overflowed throughout much of Beirut and Mount Lebanon governorates in summer 2015, the government’s “solution” to the “crisis” was landfilling in the peripheries of the capital. Because patronage is a pillar of neoliberal governance in Lebanon, a lucrative contract was awarded to Khoury Contracting Company (KCC), whose owner is close to the former

<sup>1</sup> I thank the Arab Council for the Social Sciences editorial committee, especially Seteney Shami, for providing generous feedback throughout the revision process; my adviser, Kyle Parry, for reading and commenting on the first draft of this essay; Lara Bitar and Reem Joudi.

<sup>2</sup> Rajana Hamieh, “Mina’ al-dawra Burj Hammūd: Al-ramaq al-akhīr” [Harbor of Dora-Burj Hammūd: The last breath], *Al-Akhbar*, July 16, 2018, <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/254222>.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Verdeil, “Seafront Reclamations, Rubble, and Waste: A Metabolic Reading of Lebanese Urbanization,” *The Derivative*, September 16, 2021, <https://thederivative.org/for-rubble-%D8%B1-%D8%AF-%D9%85/>.

<sup>4</sup> Fadi Mansour, “From Trash Dump to Dreamland: An Entangled History of Toxicity and Capital,” *Jadaliyya*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38158>. On toxic waste, see “Merchants of Death (Part 2 of 2),” *Public Source*, October 11, 2022, <https://thepublicsource.org/toxic-barrels-beirut-port-lebanon>.

<sup>5</sup> The Armenian Tashnag Party played a role in closing the garbage mountain in 1997.

presidential family. In 2016, KCC began construction on two landfills, in Burj Hammūd and Jdeideh, incorporating the garbage mountain into the first as filling material.<sup>6</sup> Today, the Dora fishing harbor is not only adjacent to the former site of the “garbage mountain,” it is also besieged by these two new unregulated landfills.

Death and dying are foretold: *matmar*, Arabic for landfill, is derived from the verb *tamara*, meaning to “fill up with earth,” “bury,” and “inter.”<sup>7</sup> Witnessing the decay of the coastal sea in his daily life through the disappearance of fish and his livelihood, Chaker articulates a feeling of (untimely) death. But if decay is the course of life, then “what kind of experience of decay makes ‘decay’ come into our consciousness?” asks anthropologist Ghassan Hage. Hage proposes that “pathological decay,” after Friedrich Nietzsche, is the kind of decay that becomes troublesome. It is “happening at what we consider an unusual rhythm, often too quickly . . . progressing outside the confines of where we expect it to exist . . . ‘out of place’ [and] ‘out of tempo.’”<sup>8</sup> The sea was “not meant to die” in the fisherman’s lifetime, but something “out of tempo” and “out of place” is making him feel like the sea is pathologically decaying. This “something” is the failing infrastructure of waste.

In this essay, I outline the political economy of this failed infrastructure and engage with key examples of garbage politics mobilized against it. Building on earlier works that consider the spatiotemporality of failure as a structuring condition or as a field of political agency in Lebanon, I argue that infrastructural failure is both an end and a beginning. Despite infrastructure’s destructive propensities, the future is not foreclosed, not when failed processes and broken promises of service turn into political contestations that can coalesce into a radical multipronged attack that goes to the heart of the neoliberal order.

## Infrastructure in Space-Time

Infrastructure is fundamentally a spatiotemporal process. In spatial terms, landfills, dams, quarries, bridges, and pipelines reclaim lands and expand in space. They cut through geographies and transform them—creating new worlds and modes of being at the expense of others, sometimes making existing lifeworlds

<sup>6</sup> Verdeil, “Seafront Reclamations”; Mansour, “From Trash Dump to Dreamland.”

<sup>7</sup> *Al-Maany*, s.v. “tamara,” <https://www.almaany.com/en/dict/ar-en/%D8%B7%D9%85%D8%B1/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ghassan Hage, “Introduction,” in *Decay*, ed. Ghassan Hage (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 4.

disappear altogether.<sup>9</sup> In temporal terms, infrastructure carries a promise, “a stated commitment to give” and “a guaranteeing that a specified thing [like service provision, urban development, even modernity] will . . . happen.”<sup>10</sup> As a promise, infrastructure is oriented toward the future.<sup>11</sup> Infrastructural optimism has long been part of developmentalist discourses, promising to propel “nascent” postcolonial nation-states into the future of modernity and progress. The infrastructure of waste in Beirut and Mount Lebanon is no exception. The expansion of landfills around the Dora fishing harbor is part of a longer infrastructural process that accelerated under neoliberalism in postwar Lebanon. The landfilling of Beirut’s Normandy Bay (2001–5) is an early example; it promised the decay of the “old” coastal world to make way for a “new” world of value.<sup>12</sup> Executed by Solidere, a private joint-stock company in which former prime minister Rafic Hariri was a prominent shareholder, the vision for the new center of Beirut—with its luxury shops, cafés, and expensive real estate—carried promises of Lebanon’s rebirth from the ruins of war.<sup>13</sup>

But the promise of rebirth through speculative urban development, privatization, and banking supremacy—neoliberal policies catering to elites with no

<sup>9</sup> For an immersive read around infrastructure’s spatiotemporal politics and their material stakes, see Abdulrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Set in the Arabian Peninsula, this classic of the petrofiction genre vividly chronicles how pipe dreams are perceived and experienced from multiple subject positions.

<sup>10</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “promise,” <https://www-oed-com.oca.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/152432?rskey=lFmugH&result=1#eid>.

<sup>11</sup> Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, “Introduction,” in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, ed. Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Artist Marwa Arsanios powerfully engages with this particular facet of the infrastructure of waste in *Falling Is Not Collapsing, Falling in Extending* (2016), a video installation she showed in Beirut. This infrastructural process also has regional parallels, notably in Bahrain, where sea reclamations for luxurious real-estate projects is at the heart of spatial-demographic shifts and political contestation. See Omar Hesham Alshehabi, “Radical Transformations and Radical Contestations: Bahrain’s Spatial-Demographic Revolution,” *Middle East Critique* 23, no. 1 (2014): 29–51.

<sup>13</sup> Public intellectuals, literary figures, artists, and academics have accused Solidere of erasing the memory of the city. See Elias Khoury, “The Memory of the City,” *Grand Street* 54 (Autumn 1995): 137–42; Saree Makdissi, “Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (1997): 661–705; Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Judith Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut: A City’s Suspended Now* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

long-term planning—came crashing down beginning in late 2019.<sup>14</sup> Hyperinflation, hunger, unaffordable housing, unemployment, collapsing healthcare and infrastructures, decay, and tense queues for bread and gas are everyday manifestations and experiences reminiscent of the final years of the civil war.<sup>15</sup> Artist Walid Sadek writes that, far from the future-oriented space-time of rebirth, we live in the “protracted now of the civil war” maintained by sectarian political groups for dominance and plunder.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, cultural theorist Judith Naeff explains that an unresolved past and an uncertain future have produced the “suspended now.”<sup>17</sup>

---

Infrastructure has long ceased to be a promise of service. Instead, it has become a wildly deregulated field for maximal profit extraction, parceled out in state allotments and informal channels, according to relations of patronage and clientelism.

---

Within this temporal framework, and coupled with Lebanon’s political-economic system, infrastructure has long ceased to be a promise of service. Instead, it has become a wildly deregulated field for maximal profit extraction, parceled out in state allotments and

informal channels, according to relations of patronage and clientelism.<sup>18</sup> Consistently failing infrastructures of waste management, transportation, power, and water demonstrate that the ruling class maintains a perpetual infrastructural crisis to cement the political status quo and generate profits in an unproductive economy. These infrastructural failures feed into and are material consequences of the extended temporality of war and the neoliberal political economy. Today, the collapsing present is lived as a prolonged and multiple crisis with apparitions

<sup>14</sup> The so-called international community is also to blame for the economic collapse. International financial institutions and donor states have extended a lifeline to the ruling class and supported neoliberal restructuring in Lebanon.

<sup>15</sup> Feminist anthropologist Maya Mikdashi evokes the experience of time as a return to the end of the war. Maya Mikdashi, “It Was Beirut, All Over Again . . . Again,” *Middle East Research and Information Project* 300 (Fall 2021), <https://merip.org/2021/11/it-was-beirut-all-over-againagain/>.

<sup>16</sup> Walid Sadek, “In the Presence of the Corpse,” *Third Text* 26, no. 4 (2012): 479–89.

<sup>17</sup> The promise of rebirth and its attending politics of collective amnesia have produced an unresolved past, just as precariousness and bouts of violence create an uncertain and inaccessible future. Naeff, *Prekarious Imaginaries*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> On the allotment state, patronage, and clientelism after the war, see Reinoud Leenders, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

from the past and an exponentially deferred future—the specter of war and the economic fallout merge into an inability to imagine, let alone plan, a future.

## The Futures of Failure

Urban scholar Hiba Bou Akar considers the structural foreclosure of the future in urban space. She describes how of “the war yet to come,” a temporality that forecloses any future that isn’t war, produces sectarian geographies. Her robust “ethnography of spatial practices” in Hayy Madi/Mar Mikhail, Sahra Choueifat, and Doha Aramoun, militarized frontiers of intermittent conflict south and southeast of Beirut, reveals how urban planning has become “an arrangement of territories without larger social purpose,” a failing urbanism based on the production of space according to the sectarian logics of a future of war.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, on the level of political agency, anthropologist and filmmaker Joanne Nucho considers infrastructural failure and the space-time of the 2015 garbage protests as “conditions of possibility for imagined futures” other than sectarian war.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, infrastructural failure becomes a field of radical hope, where a new meaning of citizenship can emerge based on a “shared sense of brokenness” instead of sectarian belonging. Radical futures are also at stake for political anthropologist Fuad Musallam. In his “ethnography of failure” in Beirut-based activist circles between 2013 and 2016, he theorizes failures of activism “not [as] an endpoint, but a beginning.”<sup>21</sup> Through storytelling, activists turn the “failure in the air,” a generalized atmosphere after political setbacks, into a “political resource” for future action.

In this moment of prolonged crisis, we can neither understate the power of structure nor foreclose the future. Informed by analyses of failure and oppositional notions of the future, my theorizing of and with infrastructural failure attends to the combined, oppressive weight of the political-economic structure and the temporality of sectarianism and commits to the political potentials of failure as a struggle for the future—or what remains of it. Just like failed urban planning became “an end in itself” when the state delegated housing and social

<sup>19</sup> Hiba Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 174–83.

<sup>20</sup> Joanne Randa Nucho, “Garbage Infrastructure, Sanitation, and New Meanings of Citizenship in Lebanon,” *Postmodern Culture* 30, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.2019.0018>.

<sup>21</sup> Fuad Musallam, “‘Failure in the Air’: Activist Narratives, In-Group Story-Telling, and Keeping Political Possibility Alive in Lebanon,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26, no. 1 (2020): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13176>.

services to political parties and developers after the war,<sup>22</sup> I argue that with neoliberal restructuring, failed infrastructure became an end in itself, governed through what I call the logics of emergency. At the same time, failure is a field of struggle with great material stakes, which is why infrastructure is sometimes interrupted, made to break down and fail. The two valences of failure allow us to understand the (infrastructural) crisis as a “political field,” after Hage, which makes it possible to follow the struggle in critical writing, lest critique drown in the murky waters of foreclosed futures.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than seeing infrastructural failure as a *fait accompli*, what would it mean to open failure to multiple meanings? This is what I try to do here. In one sense, infrastructural failure is an end in itself of the purposeful kind, vested in ending “old” worlds in a dystopian process of creative destruction. Instead of sustained planning for the future, the politics of emergency prioritize maximizing profits for contractors favored through relations of patronage. In another sense, failure is a beginning (to paraphrase anthropologist Fuad Mussallam) toward other futures; political agency that refuses the spatial, temporal, and material terms of infrastructure can turn into a promise of revolt with radical potentials at an auspicious political point. To see failure through this rich paradox is to render failure as a field of struggle—despite asymmetrical powers—for making and unmaking social, economic, and environmental worlds in a protracted present of crisis. I lay out how the failure of waste management in Beirut and Mount Lebanon has been a planned emergency and a pillar of creative destruction; then I foreground the stakes of turning failure into a beginning beyond the paired powers of sectarian space-time and the neoliberal political economy.

## Failure as an Ending

In a first sense, infrastructural failure in the neoliberal dis-order is an end in itself, a purpose. It is also an ending, a process of terminating existing socio-environmental worlds. Political economist Joseph Schumpeter, a staunch defender of capitalism, wrote in 1942 that “creative destruction”—ending older worlds to generate new ones—is the “essential fact about capitalism.”<sup>24</sup> This notion ties together “end” and “ending,” presenting “destruction” as an end (purpose) while conjuring it in material terms as world-ending (termination) to create

<sup>22</sup> Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*, 174–83.

<sup>23</sup> Ghassan Hage, *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (1942; London: Routledge, 2003), 82.



a new world that generates new enterprise. In postwar Lebanon, the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), the governing authority on Beirut and Mount Lebanon's construction and infrastructural projects, became an instrument for Hariri's urban visions; it set in motion the pattern of creative destruction with Solidere's infamous "reconstruction" of the center of Beirut.

In 1994, with CDR's endorsement, Solidere launched an urban project founded on the literal, purposeful "destruction" of the center of Beirut and the creation of another urban core to open up a luxury shopping district and real-estate market.<sup>25</sup> Also in 1994, the CDR awarded the Beirut and Mount Lebanon governorates' waste collection and street cleaning contract to Sukleen (a subsidiary of Averda), whose founder had been a business partner of Hariri in Saudi Arabia.<sup>26</sup> Sukleen's first order of the day was to dispose of the rubble of war and creative destruction in nearby Normandy Bay, where waste had accumulated throughout the war. Rubble and waste were used to reclaim land from the bay and expand Solidere's urban project. Overnight, the infrastructure of waste became less about providing a public utility and more about providing materials for creative destruction. By the time real-estate investments in Solidere plummeted, infrastructure had all but fully transformed into an end in itself: a process of ending existing lifeworlds and creating new unlivable infrastructural zones to generate lucrative enterprise for waste management contractors—in short, a cycle of creative destruction on a loop without the assumption of progress underlying Schumpeter's thinking.<sup>27</sup> With the changing role of infrastructure, the promise of sustainable waste management came to an end, and waste became an "emergency" situation.

## Planned Emergency/Unplanning the Future

If waste management had to inevitably adapt to the state of emergency during the war—reduced to intermittent and geographically limited waste collection and dumping—"the short-term, the exceptional, and the temporary" have persisted after the war.<sup>28</sup> Rather than sustainable planning for the future, successive neoliberal governments have consistently deferred exploring and executing

<sup>25</sup> For more on the "reconstruction" project (and its destructions), see Makdisi, "Laying Claim."

<sup>26</sup> Ziad Abu-Rish, "Garbage Politics," *Middle East Report* 277 (Winter 2015), <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33377>.

<sup>27</sup> Solidere's expensive real estate was largely envisioned for wealthy investors from the Gulf. When geopolitical tensions escalated, especially after Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon, investing in Solidere became risky.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Arsan, *Lebanon: A Country in Fragments* (London: Hurst, 2018), 372.

long-term, sustainable waste management plans. Instead, the logics of emergency—a term I pick up from an “Emergency Plan for Solid Waste Management in the Greater Beirut Area” from 1997—have characterized the infrastructural governance of waste in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. These politics of emergency have sustained a perpetual infrastructural crisis, always postponing sustainable waste management.

If “emergency,” a signifier that governments have routinely used with “waste,” implies a serious, dangerous, and especially unexpected situation, I contend that there is nothing unexpected about the ongoing waste management “emergency.” Rather, it is a planned emergency. Infrastructural governance has manufactured this state and the atmosphere of infrastructural emergency to pass unpopular, lucrative landfilling projects as “short-term,” “temporary,” and “exceptional” solutions—that actually tend toward the long-term, indefinite, and repetitive—to prevent an always imminent crisis it has manufactured. This governance’s *modus operandi* is one of waiting, until waste becomes an urban crisis (or almost); extending landfills in volume, space, and operational time span; reclaiming more land on the periphery of Beirut for “temporary” landfilling; and rotating infrastructural contractors according to patronage relations. One ought to return to the establishment of the Na‘meh landfill in 1997 to grasp the logics of emergency at work and perceive its material afterlives.

Late in 1997, after fishermen and residents had shut down the Burj Hammūd garbage mountain next to the Dora fishing harbor, Minister of Environment Akram Chehayeb announced an emergency plan to clear the garbage that had been festering the streets and to contain Beirut and Mount Lebanon’s waste. Building a “sanitary landfill” on a reclaimed land in the coastal periphery of Na‘meh (south of Beirut) was a temporary emergency plan—that lasted seventeen years. In 1998, according to the dictates of Haririst patronage, Sukomi (another subsidiary of Averda) won the tender for maintaining the landfill over ten years and for treating the incoming waste to safeguard health standards.<sup>29</sup> By 2008, on the eve of Sukomi’s contract expiration, political gridlock, under-the-table haggling, deferred waste management, and a habit of waiting for crisis created an atmosphere of emergency that resulted in an extension of Sukomi’s contract and an expansion of the landfill. This cycle repeated itself in 2011, 2014,

<sup>29</sup> Matt Nash, “Cleaning Up: Turning Trash into Profit,” *Executive Magazine*, March 25, 2015, <https://www.executive-magazine.com/economics-policy/waste-management-cleaning-up>; Victoria Koussa, “La déchetterie de Naamé, ‘une fabrique à cancers’ pour ses habitants” [The Na‘meh landfill, “a cancer factory” for its inhabitants], *L’Orient Le Jour*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/934360/la-dechetterie-de-naame-une-fabrique-a-cancers-pour-ses-habitants.html>.

and 2015.<sup>30</sup>

In the span of seventeen years, the landfill had buried twelve million tons of waste (a conservative estimate), four times its intended capacity.<sup>31</sup> Its daily maintenance required layers of sand, likely quarried from nearby coastal areas to cut costs, causing incalculable human and environmental losses elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> In Na'meh, "[what] used to be valley, a very deep valley, [had become] a mountain [and] the river disappeared," says a resident from a neighboring village who had spent his childhood playing in the valley.<sup>33</sup> Without a reliable regulatory mechanism to oversee it, Sukomi neglected to sort the waste coming into the landfill.<sup>34</sup> Living near the base of a toxic mountain, the community of Na'meh has been subjected to premature death, with residents gradually succumbing to asthma attacks, lung infections, and a cancer epidemic.<sup>35</sup> When the landfill closed, Na'meh was left with a twenty-meter-tall garbage mountain, a far cry from a sanitary landfill. Similar to the garbage mountains that proliferated along the coast during the war, the one in Na'meh is a repeated history and a testament to the enduring logics of emergency under neoliberal governance, decades after the war.

When the landfill's operation was terminated in July 2015, waste began to accumulate in the streets of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The same logics of emergency reset the infrastructural cycle, as the government had been waiting for the crisis. In September, the same minister of environment, who had proposed the Na'meh landfill seventeen years before, came up with more landfilling solutions

<sup>30</sup> Nash, "Cleaning Up."

<sup>31</sup> "Naameh Landfill, Lebanon," *Environmental Justice Atlas*, November 8, 2016, <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/naameh-landfill-lebanon>.

<sup>32</sup> To satisfy the postwar "reconstruction" and development surge and claim a share of its spoils, quarries flourished uncontrollably between 1996 and 2005, including in coastal areas in contravention to the National Master Plan for Quarries and Stone Crushing Sites. Quarries have also caused cancer epidemics, especially in the Koura district, north of Lebanon, where its infrastructural operations are wildly deregulated. Public Works Studio, "Reading the Quarries' Map in Lebanon," *Jadaliyya*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38569/Reading-the-Quarries%E2%80%99-Map-in-Lebanon>; Nizar Saghieh, "Environmental Crimes in Lebanon: Unlawful Enrichment That Kills," *Legal Agenda*, April 17, 2019, <https://english.legal-agenda.com/environmental-crimes-in-lebanon-unlawful-enrichment-that-kills/>.

<sup>33</sup> L'Orient Le Jour, "Liban: Naamé, la décharge 'd'urgence' qui s'éternise" [Lebanon: Na'meh, the "emergency" landfill that drags on], YouTube, January 24, 2014, video, 2:56, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o\\_vcFpW7Aqs&ab\\_channel=L%27OrientLeJour](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_vcFpW7Aqs&ab_channel=L%27OrientLeJour).

<sup>34</sup> "Décharge de Naamé: Les manifestants suspendent leur sit-in" [Na'meh, landfill: Protestors suspend their sit-in], *L'Orient Le Jour*, January 25, 2014, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/851907/decharge-de-naame-les-manifestants-suspendent-leur-sit-in.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Koussa, "La déchetterie"; L'Orient Le Jour, "Liban: Naamé."

to clear the garbage and solve “the crisis.”<sup>36</sup> Lands were reclaimed in Khaldeh (south of Beirut), Burj Hammūd (north of Beirut), and Jdeideh (north of Beirut). The CDR selected the proposal of Al-Jihad Contracting, whose owner is close to the Hariri dynasty, for building the Khaldeh Costa Brava landfill (2016), while the landfills in Burj Hammūd (2016) and Jdeideh (2018) went to KCC, whose owner is close to the former presidential family. Despite public outcry, these landfills are extended in space and time, under the politics of emergency, which defers planning into the unforeseeable future.

Not only do these logics of emergency maintain a prolonged infrastructural crisis, they also lend themselves to prospective urban projects of creative destruction. Land reclamations along the coast could one day become the foundations for future urban development. Although there is no publicly known development project planned over Costa Brava,<sup>37</sup> the expanding landfills north of Beirut may become the literal foundations for reviving the 1980s Linord Project.<sup>38</sup> Like Solidere, Linord is a joint-stock company that envisioned a land reclamation and urban development project from Burj Hammūd to Antelias, then with the

---

The end of this failing infrastructure is not “waste management” but creative destruction *ad infinitum* . . . mutually beneficial arrangements that extend the life of the Lebanese political-economic system at the expense of existing socioenvironmental worlds.

---

support of President Amin Gemayel.<sup>39</sup> Suspended since 1995 over political and economic disputes, the project will be executed over these landfills if and when profit margins are once again favorable.<sup>40</sup>

With or without new real-estate markets, the

infrastructure of waste in Beirut and Mount Lebanon mobilizes the politics of emergency to produce an extended present of crisis, subsidized by lucrative contracts and disposable bodies exposed to early death in sacrificial geogra-

<sup>36</sup> The new plan, titled “The Crisis of Solid Household Waste: Solutions toward Moving from the Crisis to Sustainable Management,” was developed with a technical committee.

<sup>37</sup> Verdeil, “Seafont Reclamations.”

<sup>38</sup> Two days after the October 17 uprising, reviving Linord Project was on the list of “reforms” by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri (Rafic Hariri’s son) prior to his resignation. Cynthia Bou Aoun, “Bayn matmarayy Burj Hammūd w al-Jdaydeh: tawsī’ al-matamir al-bahrīyya li i’adat ihya’ Linord” [Between the landfills of Burj Hammūd and Jdeideh: Expanding coastal landfills to revive Linord], *Legal Agenda*, June 26, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Verdeil, “Seafont Reclamations.”

<sup>40</sup> Bou Aoun, “Bayn matmarayy.”

phies.<sup>41</sup> The end of this failing infrastructure is not “waste management” but creative destruction ad infinitum, a process involving engineering contractors, warlords, oligarchs, land speculators, quarries, public officials, urban developers, and international donors and lenders—all engaged in mutually beneficial arrangements that extend the life of the Lebanese political-economic system at the expense of existing socioenvironmental worlds. This infrastructural governance is not only troubling but has been troubled, resisted, interrupted, and foiled; its failures can become beginnings against foreclosed futures.

### Failure as a Beginning

In a second sense, failure is a beginning that starts with a broken promise. As a commitment to do something for someone, a promise is attached to a claim that gives the one who had been promised the right to demand its fulfillment.<sup>42</sup> Repeated failures to honor promises lead to disagreement, resentment, and hostility. Because infrastructure is ostensibly a promise of providing service, the government's failure to fulfill this promise generates anger and discontent. Joanne Nucho illustrates this idea, writing that “*wayn al dawleh?*” [where is the state?], a phrase widely “deployed in everyday life . . . express[es] the longing for dependable infrastructure and anger at a government that seems unable, or unwilling, to provide it.”<sup>43</sup> This anger boiled over in 2015, leading to a series of protests for sustainable waste management that turned into antigovernment rallies in the center of Beirut.<sup>44</sup>

There's also a deeper kind of anger here, which stems less from disappointment that the government is failing to clear waste from the street and more from the refusal of communities and workers to pay for removing waste out of the streets with their lives. This anger arises from the differential harm that

<sup>41</sup> Sukleen's rate per ton was one of the highest in the world. See Jad Chaaban, “One Year On, Lebanon's Waste Management Policies Still Stink,” Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, September 1, 2016, <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/articles/details/1946/one-year-on-lebanon%E2%80%99s-waste-management-policies-still-stink>.

<sup>42</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “promise.”

<sup>43</sup> Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructure, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>44</sup> When the residents of Na'meh shut down the landfill, waste became matter out of place again, and the 2015 garbage protests began. I was on the ground throughout the summer-long protests, known as Tol'it Rihetkon (You Stink!), and followed how the demand for service quickly turned into discontent with “corruption” and the neoliberal political economy. I also perceived how these protests became a space where accountability, learning, and solidarity were mediated, and how its failures became a beginning, in Mussallam's sense, toward the October 17 uprising. I engage with this episode in my doctoral dissertation.

some communities and workers have lived with since neoliberal governance deregulated infrastructure. Time and again, they have interrupted deadly infrastructural processes with acts of political agency and sustained organizing. In this sense, infrastructure fails when communities and workers refuse its material bearings and disrupt it at different nodes of the process with direct action: strikes, blockades, arson, sabotage. From the long saga against infrastructure, I briefly return to 1997 and 2020 to follow how protagonists interrupted the processes that were killing them slowly.

After sustained pressure to close the Burj Hammūd garbage mountain, Chehayeb promoted his (first) Emergency Plan on June 27, 1997, in a political talk show.<sup>45</sup> The plan consisted of renovating and expanding the capacity of the ‘Amrussiyeh incinerator in Choueifat, a southern suburb of Beirut, which had been closed for a month after a series of mobilizations led by women and students and joined by environmental organizations, including Greenpeace, and representatives of sectarian political groups.<sup>46</sup> A few hours after the televised appearance, residents from Hayy al-Sellum, an impoverished Shi‘ite neighborhood close to the incinerator, congregated near the facility to thwart the plan. Around midnight, community members broke the concrete wall separating them from the facility, set fire to the Sukleen-run incinerator, and sustained a blockade until dawn to stop fire fighters and security forces.<sup>47</sup> Local newspaper *Assafir* reported that participants in this women-led action articulated discontent with the government for systematically neglecting and impoverishing this part of Choueifat. A little after midnight, when sectarian political representatives flocked to the scene to contain the situation and deescalate it, their voices were drowned out by a growing chorus of protesters singing praise for an influential Shi‘ite cleric who had recently called for “civil disobedience” and a “hunger revolt,” then satirical rhymes directed at Sukleen’s owner.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> This was the first emergency plan, devised with Sukleen. When the protagonists of this story foiled it, Chehayeb proposed the second emergency plan later in that year, which turned Na‘meh into a landfill.

<sup>46</sup> Based on the reporting of *Assafir* newspaper from April 23 and May 26, 1997. Representatives of Hezbollah and Amal Movement were present. The plan also consisted of renovating the Karantina incinerator in northeastern Beirut.

<sup>47</sup> Hussein Ayūb, “Tadakhul Amal wa Hizbullah lam yukif al ‘hujūm’ wa nisa’ al-hayy qudna al-tahharuq” [The interference of Amal and Hizbullah couldn’t stop the “attack” and neighborhood women led the mobilization], *Assafir*, June 28, 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Ayūb, “Tadakhul.” Subhi al-Tufayli, former member and secretary general of Hezbollah, had made calls for a “hunger revolt” in the Bekaa to begin on July 4, 1997, before he was officially sidelined a year later. I am not taking a position vis-à-vis Tufayli or presenting him as a revolutionary vanguard. I merely show that his sectarian, class-inflected rhetoric resonated with the disgruntled of this story.

There are three takeaways from this story. First, it demonstrates that lucrative waste management enterprise has always relied on a biopolitics of disposability in sacrificial geographies, in this case, impoverished neighborhoods in the southern suburb of Beirut, where a local doctor had linked cases of typhoid, asthma, and skin diseases to the incinerator.<sup>49</sup> Second, it reveals that in a decisive act of refusal, communities can foil infrastructural schemes that subject them to slow violence, a form of attritional violence extended in time and space, like pollution, toxicity, and disease.<sup>50</sup> Third, it shows how infrastructural failure can become a promise of revolt, if not a beginning beyond foreclosed futures. Here, failure became a field for class antagonism, although this antagonism was part of a sectarian consciousness that is spatially reproduced through decades of neglect.<sup>51</sup>

In spring 2020, it was the workers' turn to disrupt the infrastructure of waste when the material conditions of racialized labor became unbearable. Migrant laborers from Bangladesh and India began a strike in late April and sustained it by blocking access to the waste management facility of RAMCO, Sukleen's successor, and sabotaging garbage trucks. In mid-May, they released a statement explaining the lead-up to the strike, recounting a horrific but not unique instance of racialized violence in the facility that began on April 8, three weeks before their work stoppage.<sup>52</sup> They chronicled how security guards and a supervisor tortured one of their own when his mental health deteriorated, then left him in solitary confinement for three days.<sup>53</sup> In the same statement, they spelled out their grievances: threats of deportation without pay, coercion to work in the pandemic, overwork, and withheld or late salaries in Lebanese lira before demanding their wages in US dollars, based on their employment contracts. In the third week of May, state security violently crushed the strike, and RAMCO resumed negotiations with the workers and their embassies to avoid another "garbage crisis." All in all, workers interrupted waste collection for two weeks.

<sup>49</sup> Ayūb, "Tadakhul."

<sup>50</sup> See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>51</sup> I am grateful to historian (and friend) Hicham Safieddine who spurred me to further consider the relationship between sectarian consciousness and class antagonism in this episode and beyond, something I take up in my dissertation.

<sup>52</sup> The English version of the statement can be read at <https://twitter.com/Leaboukhater/status/1261717681516003329>. An Arabic version with modifications exists, too. This paragraph contains information I compiled from both statements.

<sup>53</sup> The underground solitary confinement, space out of sight, is reminiscent of the infamous 'Adlieh underground parking lot where General Security detained migrants in large bedless cages between 1992 and 2016.

Four key points can be drawn from this unprecedented migrant workers' strike. First, the government's role is further reduced to securitizing lucrative infrastructural interests, deploying state security as necessary.<sup>54</sup> Second, the turn toward racialized migrant labor has been integral to deregulating this infrastructure under neoliberal governance. Lucrative infrastructure has depended not only on

---

What would remain of this place if infrastructural failure were not turned into a beginning toward other futures and a commitment to what remains and must remain?

---

creative destruction and the logics of emergency but also on the compounded precariousness of migrant labor: legal restrictions toward unionizing means weakened collective bargaining power, and being governed by the

*kafala* migrant worker sponsorship system means working under the threat of racial violence.<sup>55</sup> Exploitative labor conditions and racialization are the irreducible material realities of this migrant workforce, which the workers themselves underscored in their statement. Third, the infrastructural process, no matter how deregulated, cannot proceed without workers, despite the historical blow that was dealt to labor in this sector when waste management was privatized in 1994.<sup>56</sup> Fourth, this promising strike suggests the return of work stoppage as a tactic of infrastructural interruption. It can also be a beginning toward other labor futures free from the precariousness of exploitation and racialization on which the neoliberal political economy was founded and built with sweat and blood.<sup>57</sup>

Today, the crisis is changing the face of the formal workforce in the waste

<sup>54</sup> Besides squashing this labor mobilization, the army has been deployed intermittently near various landfills to prevent activists from shutting them down.

<sup>55</sup> On unionizing, see Lea Bou Khater, "Understanding State Incorporation of the Workers' Movement in Early Post-War Lebanon and Its Backlash on Civil Society," Civil Society Knowledge Centre, January 1, 2019, <https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/understanding-state-incorporation-workers-movement-early-post-war-lebanon-and-its-backlash>. On *kafala* and racialization, see Sintia Issa, "Kafala Reform a Liberal Veneer: Migrant Workers and the Struggle for Liberation," *Public Source*, September 7, 2020, <https://thepublicsource.org/kafala-reform-liberal-veener-migrant-workers>.

<sup>56</sup> Before the privatization of waste management, waste workers in the Beirut municipality belonged to a strong union capable of threatening its public employer with work stoppage to achieve fair working conditions. Abu-Rish, "Garbage Politics."

<sup>57</sup> Anthropologist Sumayya Kassamali explains that neoliberalism exceeds economic policies and argues that outsourcing racialized labor and the sponsorship system are tenets of neoliberalism in Lebanon. Sumayya Kassamali, "Neoliberalism and Kafala," *Public Source*, October 11, 2022, <https://thepublicsource.org/neoliberalism-kafala>.



sector—as many migrant workers quit and left or were laid off and deported, possibly without pay. Lebanese from long-neglected geographies (notably Akkar in the north) now make up part of the formal workforce. Next to them, informal workers, predominantly Syrians, subsidize the recycling economy with their bodies, something they have been doing since waste management was privatized;<sup>58</sup> their toxic labor is a fundamental social-reproductive mechanism of global capitalism.<sup>59</sup> In the midst of crisis, a renewed sense of scarcity has heightened tensions between formal and informal workers, which infrastructural governance has capitalized on to sow divisions and further devolve infrastructure onto and into exploited labor.<sup>60</sup> Meaningful solidarity between differentially precarious formal and informal workers is necessary; it begins with subverting differentiation schemes intended to divide them. Through organizing and solidarity, it becomes possible to fight more deregulation in the infrastructural process, of which labor is a part, and confront the logics of emergency that seem to be always expanding.

Reversing the logics of emergency also depends on meaningful solidarity between communities made to get sick and die prematurely. It entails organizing against the myopia of NIMBYism (not in my backyard) that has contributed to differentiations between peopled geographies and made the ends of infrastructure possible. Seeing failure as a beginning appeals to a radical imagination where the residents of Hayy al-Sellum, Burj Hammūd, and Na'meh come together as a unified front against the leviathan of failed infrastructure and its far-reaching tentacles in the political-economic system. It means mobilizing against a discourse that represents waste as a sectarian matter, pitting communities against each other and reinforcing spatially produced sectarian divisions that extend political dominance and a form of enrichment premised on laying sustaining environments to waste. Failure can be a beginning toward a nonsectarian, class-based consciousness within a shared geography that has been subjected to profound material losses, which is why an organized political body

<sup>58</sup> Anthropologist Elizabeth Saleh explains that private waste collection companies have forgone recycling, contributing to “a longer history of scavengers rummaging through the garbage bins in the country.” Elizabeth Saleh, “The Master Cockroach: Scrap Metal and Syrian Labour in Beirut’s Informal Economy,” *Contemporary Levant* 1, no. 2 (2016): 100.

<sup>59</sup> Vinay Gidwani explores how global capitalism is subsidized with working bodies of men and women in Delhi’s informal recycling economy. Vinay Gidwani, “Remaindered Things and Remaindered Lives: Traveling with Delhi’s Waste,” in *Finding Delhi: Loss and Renewal in the Megacity*, ed. Bharati Chaturvedi (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 35–54.

<sup>60</sup> Confrontations between workers in a landfill led to the death of a waste picker in 2022. Richard Salame, “Trash Economy: Death in Landfill Highlights Need for Reform,” *L’Orient Today*, September 2, 2022, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1310259/trash-economy-death-in-landfill-highlights-need-for-reform.html>.

capable of reclaiming infrastructure to plan the future is critical. Otherwise, what would remain of this place if infrastructural failure were not turned into a beginning toward other futures and a commitment to what remains and must remain?

**Sintia Issa** lives and writes in Beirut. She is a PhD candidate in visual studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, retelling in her dissertation the story of neoliberalism in postwar Lebanon through the story of waste. Her public contributions on the politics of infrastructure, labor, migration, feminist histories, and visual culture have appeared in the *Public Source*, a women-led, award-winning, independent journalism project where she is editor at large, Knowledge Workshop, Legal Agenda, and more. She trained as an art historian at the University of Toronto, then developed and taught courses at the School of Architecture and Design of the Lebanese American University.